THE SEVENTH AGE
or
SAINT SATURNIN

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by

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Translated by Madame Bussy

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CONTENTS

PART I

AUTUMN

I

THE SILENCE of midnight. Not a breath. Not a sound for an ear stretched to listen, however intently. Not a rustle, not the stirring of a leaf. Nothing more, one would think, could be retrenched, nothing more be stifled that would make the stillness of the air more deathly. But yet, with the silence that precedes the first approach of dawn, something seems still further rarefied, withdrawn from the world, extinguished in the black immensity. For the depths of midnight were yet peopled by an imperceptible drip-dripping. Along each blade of grass had stolen the overflow of dew. Curtains of moisture had shut out the uttermost solitudes. It is not till now, when all the vapours had vanished, that the ear, as though struck dizzy in these frozen spaces, fails to distinguish any slightest quiver, any single breath of life.

Suddenly, unheralded by any glimmer, a horn uprises, cold and yellow. The huge crescent rides clear of what looks like a ridge of woods, and begins to climb the waste stretches of the sky. A moon in its last quarter, a moon that rises unnoticed in the desert. Sometimes it shines perhaps on a sleepy carter, but he keeps his eyes on his beasts' hindquarters without lifting his face to the light ; or sometimes on a peasant crossing his yard, lantern in hand and intent only on the calving of his cow. Useless moon ! Symbol of tendernesses disdained, of objectless virtues that bloom and fade unwanted, of offerings vainly wasting in obscurity ! A waning, dwindling moon, that lifts its light on the horizon at the hour when the dying man lies gasping, fumbles with his sheets, and sinks into the dark abysses from which he will never climb again into the light of day.

The moonshine has called up out of the dark a strange, unrecognisable country, traversed by great streams of milk that wind here and join there, drowning all the hollows of

the landscape in their lakes and meanderings. They are made of the mist that lies on the meadows in thick sheets, surrounding hills and clumps of trees as if they were so many peninsulas and archipelagos. Those buoys that float in the magic waters and seem to mark a channel, are really the tops of the poplars that follow the stream as it winds through the Saint Saturnin meadows. But beyond them, what fantastic mirage projects an enormous funereal cross over the part of the country that lies unsubmerged ? At the meeting of the four cross-ways, what are those unwonted lights, like a double row of tapers standing in front of a catafalque ? Are the four avenues planted in his day by old Nicholas Colombe high enough to cast such deep trenches of shadow ? There, sure enough, are the Château roofs, the great slate slope of the main building and the shorter slants of the two wings. But why are all the windows lighted ? In a silence such as this it can hardly be a fire devouring the inside of the house, nor yet a party flaring to its end. Nothing moves on the terraces or lawns. The home farm, close by, seems plunged in its usual nightly sleep. Beyond, all the country-side lies dark and slumbering. Those clear-cut, vivid gleams among the houses of the hamlet are the shining of the water in the village drinking troughs. And that silver point is nothing but the iron plating of the steeple. But further away still, among the confusion of hedges and trees, what is that strange pattern, those sharp, hard chequers of black and white ? . . .

The moon looks down on nine great slabs which reflect its light. At a little distance, lie huddled the crowd of lesser tombs, while in a broad stretch of turf, alike and regular, are ranged the grave-stones beneath which, for the last hundred years, the Colombes have found their resting-place—two rows of four slabs and a single stone by itself at the beginning of the third row. Not a doubt as to where the next will come. There is room enough and to spare in the grass. An

ambitious family in life and death. Can it be threatened with extinction, that its work is left thus unfinished? The architecture of stone and grass has awaited its continuation over long, hoped over long for the coming that will perfect its symmetry. . . .

She is dying who was the soul of the house ; she is dying who was thought colourless because she was timid, who was thought weak of will because charity was her first consideration. Elisabeth ! Her seventy years are now accomplished, and when the fever struck her down, it needed no more than a week to render her legs helpless, and then her arms, to obstruct her speech and then stop it, to stop even the movement of her eyes. Her two sons and her daughter are with her, wondering at her calm, her grandeur. She is still able from time to time to show them by the faintest pressure of her fingers that she is glad of their presence. But she wants to speak. There is something, someone she is looking for. . . .

II

Louis, trying not to make the floor-boards creak (the lightest footstep resounds in this hall), joins his brother Nicholas, whom he finds sitting on the stairs. He says in a whisper :

" You were right."

" Have you tried to wake him ? "

" I took a light and went up to his bed. Then I said, ' Do you want to see her again ? The end can't be far off.' He didn't answer a word, but began to breathe heavily—to snore almost. There's not the smallest doubt possible—he was pretending to be asleep. I distinctly saw his eyelids open and shut again."

" It can't be helped," murmurs Nicholas ; " he's growing old." But the long years of filial respect are not to be wiped out in a few hours. The elder son cannot yet accept what it is yet impossible to deny.

" Who would have thought he was capable of shamming in that cowardly way ? "

No, he didn't mean that. Foolish words ! But his brother's resignation irritates him and his head is muddled with fatigue, for there has been no sleep for three days. . . . He sits down on the step too.

" I don't mean he's without courage. I know he can even take a certain pleasure in difficulty. But when it's a matter of feelings, he's afraid of suffering ; he just shirks it. At this moment it's obvious. He hopes the end will come while he is supposed to be asleep."

Nicholas's thoughts seem to be wandering, but at last he says :

" Yes, there's something of that. . . . And then perhaps he's afraid of not being able to control himself, of breaking down before us all. He's still clear-sighted enough to try

and conceal his weaknesses. You were right not to insist."

"I was wrong! He would have had us to help him bear up. At this moment, it's Mother's peace of mind that matters, not his."

"My poor old Louis, it's too late for that now."

But the elder is not accustomed to giving in so easily.

"You won't prevent me from thinking that when we couldn't understand her and she was making those painful efforts. . . ."

"She stopped making them several hours ago," answers Nicholas. . . . "There were too many people in the room, that's why I came away. But I assure you that nothing in the world now can disturb the peace of the bedroom. You have only to look. . . . Jourdaine keeps hold of her hand; she says the pulse is getting weaker. Mlle Cheu prevents the pillows from slipping down. And as for Mother's face, it still has that marvellous look of calm that has been on it since early this afternoon."

Wasn't that something stirring? They raise their heads. Then Nicholas looks at his watch. The hands have scarcely moved. . . . How swift the leaps of Death are when he attacks from right and left, without giving us time to breathe! But why does he delay now? Where is he lingering now that the doors are flung wide open to receive him? . . . The brothers' thoughts travel at random, return, drop back again into their rut.

"It isn't that he is old," Louis begins again; "or, if you prefer it, it isn't that his mind has weakened. Four or five days ago, when he realised that the illness was serious, do you remember how he said, 'I always thought *I* should be the first to go. All my arrangements were made in view of that.' I am positive that at that moment he was the same as we have always known him—a man who weighs things equitably and considers his own death calmly. I admired his perfect simplicity, his absence of fine words. . . ."

Nicholas's eyelids are dropping with fatigue; he leans his head against the banisters.

"You only see him from time to time," he says ; "that's why you are surprised. But I live with him and . . ."

His brother retorts harshly :

"All the same, a man doesn't let the wife he has lived with for nearly fifty years, leave him with so little of a wrench."

"That's exactly what I mean," murmurs Nicholas, "by growing old."

Majestic moment of departure ! The ship slips out between the lights of the two jetties, and already there swells beneath it the roll of the open sea. Greatness with no alloy of trickery in it, greatness impossible to be assumed, greatness rising from the deepest springs of being—a whole life gathered into the look of two eyes that have ceased to see.

Jourdaine still feels beneath her fingers the feeble flutter of the artery. She dares not let go her hold lest she should lose the tiny threat for ever. A weakness so near extinction and a look so triumphant ! So then, that gentle face, those features, thickened and blunted by the threat of corpulence, had hidden an almost imperial head, sharp and bright now with the flame of fever ; and those eyes, once so fearful of battle, so easily driven to shelter behind their lids, seem now to have broken down the very walls and to be gazing on some strange and solemn spectacle, enduring undaunted some ineffable light !

Louis and Nicholas have come into the room again. Jourdaine does not even turn her head towards her brothers. No one dares move for fear of disturbing that mysterious act of transfiguration. The time has gone by when slight offices could bring relief. The old housekeeper, Mlle Cheu, steps back into the dark at the further end of the room, and stands there scanning the expressions of the different faces, crushingly conscious of the rash promise she has made and which she will soon be obliged to keep. But oh, perhaps it is not yet the moment ! To put it off—to put it off a little longer ! But what sign will tell her that the exact minute has come when, shy and ridiculous as she is, she must step forward and

fulfil her vow ? The minutes are slipping by. Soon perhaps it will be too late.

Suddenly at her back the clock strikes four. The four strokes are decisive and drive her forward. She knocks against a chair. A good thing ! She feels now that the whole household has heard her and that it is impossible to draw back. Then she steps resolutely in front of Jourdaine and seizes the lamp. Before anyone has had time to wonder what the distracted creature means to do, she holds the light close up to the dying woman's face and puts her own as near to it as possible. Then with all her force she cries aloud :

" Madame, Madame, it is I, Jenny ! "

And then louder still, articulating each syllable :

" *The Everlasting liveth !* "

She takes her breath and a second time, in a cracked, unrecognisable voice, she cries again, as loud as she can cry :

" *The Everlasting liveth !* "

In the face where the motionless features had for hours past seemed fixed in their final rigidity, the two eyelids are seen to quiver. Slowly, slowly, as with an immense effort they begin their last journey—drop for the last time—reach their final goal. Then something stiffens in the jaw, the mouth, which had been slightly open, closes, the lips tighten.

Jourdaine has taken the lamp from the trembling hands that can hardly hold it. She and her two brothers are alone now, bending over the closed face. Louis leans his ear to the chest that has ceased to rise and fall. But the heart still beats. They wait on. There is no relaxing of the features. A quarter of an hour later, Louis listens again and again hears the beating. They return to their watching but without daring now to question the pulse, as if the spark that still lives on in the dark recesses of the flesh might suspect its extinction was being listened for. But when Jourdaine puts her hand on her mother's forehead, she feels it is nearly cold.

There will be no need to bind the chin. The jaw has not dropped.

In the embrasure of the window, Mlle Cheu is on her knees on the floor. Jourdaine tries to raise her.

"Dear Jenny, you must come now."

A face flooded with tears is lifted to hers.

"Oh, Madame de Sinnis, what could I do? She forced me to swear! . . . When she began to get weak so quickly three days ago, she knew perfectly well she wasn't going to recover. Oh, you had no idea how clear-headed she still was. She had great difficulty in speaking, but once when none of you were there, she said, 'I shall have need of you, Jenny. . . . When you see it's the end . . . I want you to warn me. . . .' I told her she was wrong. I promise you I said everything I could to reassure her. But it vexed her. She signed to me to be quiet. 'I want you to warn me. . . . But I'm afraid you won't dare. . . . So you are just to say, "*The Everlasting liveth!*" . . . I shall know what it means. . . .' And then she thought of everything. 'You must stand in the light. . . . You must call out very loud . . . because perhaps I shan't be able to see . . . or to hear very well. . . . Jenny, you must promise me. . . . I want my children's remembrance of me to be a beautiful one. . . .' She spoke with such difficulty; how could I argue? She said too, 'You must arrange me in my white lace scarf. . . .'"

The poor old thing is choked with sobs. She seizes Jourdaine's hand.

"I was obliged to promise . . . but I didn't think it would be so dreadful. . . ."

The alarm has not been given to the household yet. The sons will not let any hands but theirs set the room in order, and the women adorn as best they can the white form on the white bed. The fair face lies there unimpaired—the face that claimed nothing but the modesty of love and carried it to such heights that it became magnificence.

And now, standing there all four, they can at last listen to their thoughts. . . .

Louis Colombe's Meditation

. . . Father used to tease her at table and she would always be put out by it. We used to say, " Don't you see, Mother, that he's only teasing you ? " There were a great many things we didn't expect her to understand. . . . If I sometimes said to myself that Nicholas reasoned like Mother, it was not on the days when I thought his opinion most worth having. People wondered : " How can those children of Elisabeth's be so unlike her ? It's their father they take after." We thought we took after Father in everything. Strange ! . . . And Reine, in one of her insolent fits, once said to her (how can I have allowed my wife to speak so ?) : " Mother, if you hadn't always been so frightened, their pride would have been less unbearable." Yes, but afterwards, when our boy fell ill and they nursed him together, Reine guessed more, saw more—saw hidden riches that none of us ever managed to see. . . . One is always so harassed ; one never has time. . . . And one's judgments are so hasty, so unfair. . . .

Because she always had to do an addition sum three times over and lost her head at bridge, we were astonished that Father with his vast intelligence, never did anything without consulting her. So many years without a cloud ! So deeply attached as he was to her ! The attachment of a whole lifetime ! . . . And how calmly and royally she reigned over the household ! . . . One understands things better now. One'll have to revise a great many firmly rooted ideas. He seemed so unchanging, so strong. What a falling off !

Women are puzzling. I wish Reine were here. I should have liked her to see it all. And the children too. I wish they could have had such an extraordinary memory to keep by them always. (That boy's lung not well yet ! . . .) They might have had a glimpse of something they're lacking in—

something that can't be taught. And who knows whether some day, in some emergency of our lives, Reine too mayn't suddenly reveal another self under all that careless grace of hers . . . ?

Jourdaine de Sinnis's Meditation

You can't speak, you can't listen any more now, darling old Mother. I shall never be able to say anything more to you, and what I've kept to myself, I must keep to myself now for the rest of my life. And you wanted me to speak to you so much, you tried so sweetly to coax your obstinate daughter—so sweetly, so simply, as one might hold out a head of maize to entice a naughty goat. Why didn't you ask something else of me? As if prudence and pride didn't keep one silent! . . . Didn't you see that one's troubles are only bearable as long as one doesn't own up to them? You bent your head lower over your work to hide your disappointment. I saw your kind cheeks get pink with a little spark of temper.

And I quickly talked of something else.

Now it's all over and you have taken with you for ever the consolations I so wickedly refused. You were still so bright, so fresh, so busy over other people's happiness! You deserved a gentle daughter, with a transparent heart. And Louis's wife is not the one either to let herself melt like snow under the first ray of kindness. And Nick's died too soon—the best of the three.

Why, I wonder, why? It seemed so easy to understand us. And sometimes your eyes were sharp enough. Father used to say, whenever I paid you an extra long visit, "Our daughter is becoming more affectionate. Like all good things, the riper she gets the sweeter." Poor old Father! But *you* were not so easily deceived; you guessed that it was a little cruel to be too glad. . . .

Nicholas Colombe's Meditation

How she ran to meet me down the path—when even walking used to make her breathless—her hat on one side, her cloak all soiled with mud ! With what a voice—with what a voice—she kept on repeating over and over again, " The children are safe ! " And I shook her by the arm—how I shook her, poor thing !—to make her speak more quickly. . . . Traces of mud and trails of water all the way upstairs. . . . A trampled reed on one of the steps. . . . I walked after her. I stopped when she stopped. It was she who opened the door. . . .

And now it's her turn to have her hair dressed—to be laid out. The same embroidered coverlet . . .

Her hair was wet, reeking with pond water. Mother went on her knees and stroked her hands—the rings were still on them. How passionately she looked at the white face ! And now it's our turn to look at *your* white face. . . . How she tried to conjure away the phantom of my fault ! My fault—so slight and so overwhelming ! . . . When we questioned the children, they always gave the same answer : " We were looking at the fishes."

Two children leaning over the side of the boat and falling into the water. Did she call for help ? . . . Was her last call for me ? . . . The cold of the water ! Her legs caught in her dress and entangled in the weeds ! Two children clutching her ! What a weight ! What agony keeping them above water ! No hold for her hands on the brick masonry of the dam ! . . . She called him. . . . He didn't come ! . . .

" You promise to come with us on the pond ? It's a promise, isn't it, Nick ? " And meeting that fellow with his axe on his shoulder, who insisted on my going with him to mark the trees—right into the middle of the wood. (How can the master go rowing when his workmen want work ? . . .) And then coming back by the village to get cigarettes. . . . "You promise to come with us on the pond . . ." She was holding a fruit-knife—she had just been

peeling an apple. She looked at me so trustfully, so calmly. " It's a promise, isn't it, Nick ? " . . . Cigarettes ! . . . " Isn't it, Nick ? . . ."

Jenny Cheu's Meditation

They're not crying—not one of them. What self-control ! They're much too afraid of showing their weakness. How hard all these Colombes are ! As for me, my handkerchief's sopping. Yes, I did see a tear or two on Madame de Sinnis's eyelids, but they didn't fall. And it's her mother ! Not that she has a bad heart. But as for me I simply can't. Oh, kind lady ! Oh, kind mistress ! My only friend ! Oh, my dearest Elisabeth ! . . . I did what you asked me to and my knees are still shaking under me. Oh, what a burden you put on my shoulders ! . . .

They don't know what they've lost, poor children. They don't know what they are threatened with. They thought she was a little foolish—foolish children that they are themselves. Perhaps Nicholas, as he lives here, realises a little better. But she was so clever at pretending, at hiding difficulties. Oh dear ! What will they do ? What will become of the house ? And I have no other home. . . . Lord, let the trial that awaits us not be greater than we can bear, for the way that lies before us is very dark.

Thus, during their four silences, their thoughts rise, cross, separate, as each and all of them pursue their own preoccupations.

Nothing stirs in the room except a strip of brightness that flames on the red carpet and turns slowly towards the bed like the hand of a magic clock. It touches Jourdaine's foot and rouses her. What ! is it the autumn sun already filtering through the crack of the shutters ? She goes up to the window. From the distance come the farm noises as usual : the sound of the horses' feet, the clinking of pails being moved in the dairy. . . . As usual.

She listens more attentively. Someone is walking on the landing. She thinks it is the servants, hears nothing more, but holds her breath. And suddenly she is sure : the door handle has moved. Very slowly the door opens—just opens, then stops. No one comes in. The apprehension is too much for her and she goes to the door. It is as she thought ; her father is there, bare-footed and in his night-shirt, holding a plaid tightly round him. She kisses him, takes him by the arm, makes him come in.

The old man looks first at the standing figures. He jerks his head a little, as if to say "Good morning" or "So it is." Then he goes up to the bed, kisses his wife's forehead, raises himself, and without a word, and still escorted by Jourdaine, with shoulders bent and feeble steps, leaves the room.

III

To begin with there had been nothing but a big tumble-down building, brick walls with courses of white stone, gaping windows and doors opening on to stretches of uncultivated ground. Owls nested in the lofts and cows took shelter from the flies in the ground-floor rooms. The original masters had disappeared without leaving a trace—cleared out by emigration and the guillotine. And no posterity had remained to carry on their name, to protest against injustice and come every twenty years or so to look with an embittered eye at a place altered out of all recognition. They had died without descendants, let them be buried in oblivion ! So much the better if pillage has obliterated every sign of their presence, scattered everything that could be sold ; if floors and wainscots, casements and banisters, have been used as fuel in the neighbouring farms. In the room that Jourdaine occupies, there still remains over the door a little carved panel in which a slender wreath of leaves entwines a piece of moulding. No doubt it had not been worth while to use a ladder to tear down this scrap of wood. But it is not a fragment such as this, with its poor little foliage, drowned under a coating of white paint, like a weed escaped from the spud and covered with snow, nor the few names preserved in title-deeds, that will prevent this house and everything pertaining to it, except the bare walls and the plaster-covered beams, from being legitimately and solely *Colombe*.

It had all begun with the great-grandfather Jourdaine-Nicholas—all these visible things and, in the invisible world, the feeling that had endured a hundred years, of life lived to the full. It needed indeed the spirit of one of Napoleon's soldiers, the despair of a forty-year-old general, disillusioned by his idol—it needed one of the men who from Madrid to

Moscow had conquered and lost all Europe, to attack the gorse-grown, neglected land as if it had been a fortified place bristling with chevaux-de-frise and gabions. With much the same rash impetuosity, he had married a woman without youth or wealth, a Franc-Comtois lady he had danced with during one of the army's moves, and who turned out of more value to him than a title or a pension. Elderly as they were, they had set to work like a couple of young pioneers newly landed in America. Whilst he superintended the clearing and the planting, always booted, always on horseback, always pursuing some new scheme, she toiled courageously with her hands, cut window-panes, hung the walls with rep or chintz, sewed and embroidered. A little too countrified to be to the taste of those young women of the present day who are afraid to scratch their varnished, mother-of-pearl finger-nails, but quick-witted and cultivated, knowing English and Italian, and always with some small volume, Milton or Petrarch—on her drawing-room table. In the history of Saint Saturnin, these two are the April season which, though a little rough and boisterous, clothes the woods and meadows in green. All these excellent doors and pavements and roofs, the solid mahogany furniture, the conservatory, the avenues, are their gifts. Their portraits hang on the right of the centre panel of the drawing-room, he in uniform, she with a fantastic 1830 head-dress, and her waist clasped by a belt of cameos.

On the left side, with frames to match, are the portraits of the second generation—Victor Colombe and his wife, Clara Hoove—both young, and aureoled with a halo of legend : the brilliant Conseiller Éd'tat and the lovely English girl he had romantically eloped with from her father's manor-house. Beloved and loving, with every hope of a smiling future, she was to die tragically in the bloom of her youth, mourned by a husband, who to the end of his long life, remained jealously faithful to her memory. (The flower she took from her muslin bodice to put on the chimney-piece is preserved in a little casket, and everyone avoids the

Persian rug on the first-floor landing, where the unhappy girl rushed and fell, wrapped in flames.) Brief reign of a fairy who left behind her a perfume of delicate luxury, the taste for flowers, the love of music. To these two are owing the terraces, the stables, knick-knacks, embroideries, a cabinet full of china ; certain refinements of the heart too, the discovery of its claims, the opening out of a wider outlook on the world. In the modest Olympus of this country family, these were the amiable divinities who gave lustre to the second morning of creation : he, with a brow prematurely bald (but in default of curls, it is his necktie that flutters with a last gust of Romanticism) ; she, in a sky-blue satin bodice, her black hair smoothly parted, her eyes with a look at once sparkling and dreamy.

On the wall opposite are two other portraits. But who before to-day ever thought of looking at them ? William Colombe and Elisabeth, his wife. . . . No, this dressed-up lady, with a fine pair of shoulders showing under a Cashmere shawl, this cannot be she. The features have been a little softened, the complexion, the attitude a little modified. This is nothing but a cold image reflected by the indifferent eye of a stranger, and with every exquisite touch of personality omitted. Why has she not been made to smile as she used to smile at her children, and not as if she were in a room full of visitors ? No, it is not she, and yet she will be inevitably reduced now to this semblance ; by a melancholy assumption she will be forced to dwell in this frame, as her predecessors before her, who were once living, changing human beings too, carrying each one a universe of his own within him. They have been despoiled, betrayed, turned into nothing but these ghosts of paintings, a collection of anecdotes, mere items of an inventory.

So near she is, for her body has not yet left the house, and yet already departed. For that soulless body upstairs lying on the big bed is not her mother either. Jourdaine goes into the room from time to time and looks at it. The body that gave us birth ! But her grief wanders off into the

channels of a thousand memories, unable to settle in the form lying there. She remembers seeing her husband in tears at his own mother's bedside. He had refused to leave her and had implored to be allowed a few more hours. (Some men who do not hesitate to make other people cry are ready enough to cry themselves ; hard to the living but pitiful over an inanimate corpse.) What a relief it will be—in spite of pious falsehoods—when the beloved face, the caressing hands have disappeared, when the village undertaker has soldered down the leaden box. Heartless daughter, there still survive in you traces of the savage age when the dearest of the dead became forthwith the most malevolent of enemies. But no ; her brothers, it is clear, feel as she does. It is not in their bones and locks of hair that the dead must be loved. Twice already Nicholas has been down to the carpenter's to tell him to make haste and get done before evening. The good man had looked at him with astonishment and almost embarrassment. The people of the big house seem in a great hurry to get rid of such a kind lady. Weren't they fond of her ? Last time too one would have thought they were terrified of having a corpse within their walls. . . .

IV

THE DRAWING-ROOM shutters have been shut since yesterday and the drawing-room turned into a chapel. The bell has stopped ringing for meals. The life of the whole house seems muffled in crape. The pair of peacocks, uneasy at having no one to notice them, find their way on to the garden steps and William Colombe drives them away by raising his stick. " Silly things ! " he mutters and watches them for several moments, then leaves them and begins walking up and down—slowly, because of the rheumatism in his back. His two faithful setters have taken refuge in some alarm under a garden table and watch their master's movements anxiously. He repeats irritably, " Is there no one here ? " Then, thinking he hears a footstep, calls out, " Go and tell the gardener at once that it's high time to move the laurels into the conservatory ! " But no one hears him except an indoors maid, who hesitates as to what she should do. Then Louis comes up and his father insists :

" I assure you it's most important. If he isn't careful, he'll be taken unawares by the first frosts."

The atmosphere of catastrophe is oppressive and the old man is obviously stifling in it. Anything for a breath of fresh air ! Louis takes pity on him, and leads him away down one of the garden paths. His tongue, unloosed at last, immediately begins pouring forth a torrent of words in the attempt to work off some of his discomfort.

" They're all alike. A day's labour rather than a second's reflection. You think perhaps that men are always tempted by what indulges their laziness, but that's only true of mental laziness. Routine ! Routine ! When I was an officer, what disgusted and discouraged me most in the army was their perpetual revolt against any intelligent initiative. You'll say that my grandfather with his alertness of mind . . . Yes, but Napoleon's army was a very different matter.

That was the one place in France where there was a free field for energy. And that's why he succeeded in the army, whereas I went into industry. And yet we had the same characters. Like him, I had plenty of ideas, too many ideas, but not always the patience to put them into practice. In our family, you see, the talents run in alternate generations. There are the men who invent and the men who apply the inventions of others. I don't put those higher than these, mind you—I merely observe the fact. My father's intelligence was directed entirely towards the best utilisation of existing forces. He was first rate at turning ideas into realities, but his ideas generally came from outside. And you all take after him. Again, I don't intend to depreciate anyone. . . . You, Louis, have the same gift in business of turning things to advantage. We shall see whether your children will be examples of the family's alternate rhythm. Jourdaine has been silly enough to encourage her son to go into the army ; it seemed on the face of it to be following the tradition, but in reality, it was going against it. I told her so, but it was no good. They've given the boy a wrong start. But what's the use of talking to a woman who's terrified of not being agreeable to her husband, and at the same time constantly thwarting him ? "

Louis has many a time heard these reflections, but to-day they are uttered with unusual agitation. The old man stops, tries to kick a stone out of the way, grows irritable.

" Can't you take that stone away ? "

The dogs think they are being played with and scamper up, but a motion of his stick drives them away.

" I hope," William Colombe goes on, " they've telegraphed to him not to come."

" To whom ? "

" To her husband."

" No, how could they ? He's arriving to-night at the same time as my wife and children."

" Is Reine coming too ? "

The words escape him peevishly. But the old man is not

so much unaware of what he is saying as indolent in the control of his temper. He realises his mistake at once and tries to correct it.

"No one could blame Reine for not wanting to leave her son. How is he ? . . . I shall be very glad for all the children to be here. . . . It would please your mother. . . . Your mother always said . . . She used to say . . . with that large heart of hers . . ."

His face changes. Is he going to break down ? Is the crushing weight from which his thoughts recoil in terror going to melt in the relief of tears ? This is the one chance perhaps for his over-shadowed heart to grope its way out into the light of day. Let him be helped to cry ! Let him be forced to ! But Louis is seized with cowardice at the idea of a scene of sobs and tears. He gives another lead.

"Mother," says he, "put her heart and soul into bringing her children together, and not only her own children, but their families as well. You too have always wanted to make the house a place where we should all enjoy meeting more and more."

William Colombe is strangely eager to take advantage of the offered diversion.

"Certainly ; that's exactly my idea, and I have all kinds of plans. There are a great many things I haven't been able to set about before—a great many things I am looking forward to doing now."

Since Louis has provoked these words, why do they give him such a painful jar ? So much the better, after all, if his father does not go to pieces, if he catches hold of what lies nearest his hand in the effort to keep up. And if he can only do this by not looking things in the face, isn't it a moving sight and deserving of help and pity, this struggle of a man so rudely shaken but refusing to give way ? To-morrow, no doubt, a juster vision will modify what now seems overstressed in his words. And yet, the recollection of last night is still too fresh in Louis's mind. ("Do you want to see her

again ?" . . . And in answer, the noisier breathing, the pretence of sleep.)

"Saint Saturnin might be made more comfortable," Louis goes on; "it might be beautified. Do you remember the plans we discovered in great-grandfather's portfolio? He had already thought out a great many improvements."

A sly and rather scornful sparkle gleams in William Colombe's eye.

"It's nothing of that kind I'm thinking of."

"What then ?"

"You'll see."

They take a few more steps on one of the grassy sidewalks. But the choice must be made between a son's annoying curiosity and an unpleasant silence. Silence is worse. So the old man goes on :

"You can do your beautifying in your own way all in good time. There are more urgent things than that."

As this sentence is too vague to provoke an answer, he becomes more definite.

"The whole management of the estate must be reorganised from top to bottom."

Is Louis deaf then ?

"Nick doesn't see things big enough," Mr. Colombe exclaims vehemently, in order to sting him.

This time the elder brother turns his head and looks at him in surprise. This is all that his father wants and he becomes evasive again.

"I have been thinking it over for a long time past."

But Louis has risen to the bait.

"Nick has done the best he could with the means at his disposal. The clay soil of Normandy is not so easy to deal with as all that."

The old man is not to be caught.

"Yes, yes, I know. . . ."

"Nick," goes on Louis a little too hastily, "was perhaps wrong to settle here, on an estate that has so little future

before it ; but it was you who begged him to—and very insistently too. He's not a youngster any more."

No answer. Then, as if he has heard nothing of what Louis has been saying, William Colombe begins to consider the sky where the clouds are riding thick and low.

" Throughout my life," he says, becoming more and more impassioned by his own eloquence, " I have been in the habit of watching the clouds. There are men who travel all over the world searching for grandiose spectacles and they never think of raising their eyes to the most imposing and the most varied of them all. People say, ' The wind . . .' But there are a hundred different kinds of clouds. They have their habits like animals, their caprices, their ways of hunting their prey, of flinging themselves like a wolf on the flock, or of herding it before them like a dog. And people say, ' How beautiful the clouds were at sunset this evening ! ' As if they couldn't be beautiful unless the sun dressed them out in extraordinary colours ! The most amazing are just those that people don't look at—the grey, the dark, the shapeless. What interests me about them is not so much their colours as their life. Their drifting especially—their mysterious drifting. There is not a care in the world that isn't reduced to modest proportions, provided you stop for a quarter of an hour with your eyes fixed on their ceaseless, monotonous, formidable motion."

But it is Louis's turn now not to answer. He steals a glance at his father. ("Nick doesn't see things big enough ! " Nick is an irritating creature sometimes, but in his way he's as wise as anyone.) And the father too looks furtively at his tiresome son's face.

They have reached the big boundary stones that mark the end of the avenue where it debouches on to the road and the open country. (This is the avenue that looks westward and is called White Gates because it leads to the village of that name.) Instead of sitting down as his habit is, the old man turns round and begins to retrace his steps.

" You have taken me a great deal too far. . . . And I don't

know why you give me your arm. I'm quite able to walk by myself."

(The Clock Tower avenue leads eastwards to the church and village of Saint Saturnin and is the continuation of the one leading to White Gates ; the north avenue plunges straight into the woods on its way to Variville and is the only one of the four not to be bordered with a double row of elms ; to the south, owing to the abrupt slope of the ground down to the low-lying meadows, there is merely a portion of an avenue, intersected by two terraces.)

Nicholas feels the telegrams with which his pockets are stuffed. Sure enough, there is Jourdaine coming from the corner of the stables and making towards the path through the woods. To join her quicker, he jumps over a narrow flower-bed, and cuts across a piece of lawn. ... (Will he never give up these schoolboy ways, here, in a country where no one out his teens would ever dream of running, for fear of being thought undignified ?) He skirts round the next flower-bed. Then—oh, bother ! there's no time—takes to running again, catches up Jourdaine and hands her the bit of paper.

" Your husband can't come till to-morrow."

She takes the telegram. She is accustomed to these disappointments, but not so completely broken in to them as to have given up trying to save her face.

" They're very busy at the Embassy just now," she says.

But why take such an irritating and useless precaution to hide a secret that is public property ?

" As he's crossing by Calais, he'll get here in time all the same," says Nicholas.

She feels all her troubles lying exposed to her brother's eye. Oh, to change the subject !

" I'm going to get some fir-branches. Some more are wanted to put on the bier. I've got my garden scissors with me. Will you help me ? " And as they begin to walk along,

" All those hundreds of hands," she adds, " which we shall have to shake to-morrow ! Why couldn't we have been allowed to go by ourselves to the churchyard with just the people of the house and the village ? It might have been such a touching, dignified ceremony."

" Poor Jourdaine ! " says Nicholas. " And you're the person they've turned into a budding ambassadress ! "

" Isn't it true, Nick ? Why has Father invited all those distant relations ? He doesn't like or esteem any of them. What consolation does he suppose he'll get from their presence ? "

Her brother answers after a moment :

" Mother said to me one day, ' One of the most melancholy consequences of old age is that one becomes susceptible to flattery.' No doubt she had some special reason for saying so."

" And do you really think it possible to take pleasure in such wretched stuff ? Oh, Nick, what shall we do with the poor old thing ? "

Nicholas has been asking himself the same thing for the last week. He would not dare confess how many times during the solemn approaches of death he has let his thoughts wander to this question without finding any solution that will silence it.

He makes his way into the damp coppice which October has already thinned, and clearing a path for his sister through the brambles, he leads her to a little hollow where stands a crowded family of young fir-trees. As the brother and sister advance over the thick litter of dead leaves, their passage makes such a rustling and crackling that they neither of them think of raising their voices. But when they stop and Nicholas begins to cut the branches, Jourdaine's thoughts return to what has been tormenting her :

" The other day when we were out walking, he suddenly stopped. (He was only just beginning to feel anxious about Mother.) He gave me a frightened look—a look like a child's

and said, 'What's to become of me? *She* might be able to live alone. She'd always find someone to devote herself to. But if she goes, what shall *I* have to cling to?'"

Nicholas takes a bit of string out of his pocket, ties up the bundle and lifts it to his shoulder.

"That's a week ago," he says. "One gets accustomed to a great deal in a week. . . ."

She questions him with her eyes.

"I mean he wouldn't let such an admission escape him now."

"But yet he knows he's so feeble!"

"All the more reason!" murmurs Nicholas.

Then, still without moving:

"We've accustomed him to too much deference and respect. He will soon think us a burden, if he feels humiliated by us."

"Do you think so?"

She blushes, as she always does whenever something dawns on her mind which she feels to be a truth. Without moving they both look at the carpet of leaves.

"You'll see."

Then, as he re-adjusts the faggot on his shoulder:

"Let's go back by the brook. It's the shortest way from here."

"Oh, Nick," says she, "pray that we may die before we grow old."

The path winds alongside a thread of water that trickles between leaves. What is it makes this spot so sad? The evening that is closing in so fast, the fading light, the rising cold? The air is filled with the penetrating smell of the earth, of rotting stumps, of leaves, of moss—a potent and heady smell—the wine of melancholy! Jourdaine walks for a moment in silence behind her brother, then she says:

"Your children are so confiding, Nick, so sweet."

Without needing to turn round, he can supply the end of the sentence—the thought left in suspense: "They are so affectionate, so healthy, and there is no one to delight in

their childish grace. Dear, loving Renée, so cruelly robbed of your mother rights ! "

" Yes," he answers, " I know."

What use is it to say more ? But a moment later he gives a start. Jourdaine has uttered a cry. He sees her suddenly arrested by some invisible object ; she points to something on the ground.

" Nick ! Mother's footsteps ! . . ."

He looks. Yes, impossible to doubt it. Those are the short steps of a woman who walks with difficulty. Those are the low heels, the prints of a foot made heavy by age. She was fond of this path because of the ferns that grew on each side of it. Jourdaine murmurs :

" It looks as if she had just gone by."

The steps go in the direction of the house.

" She was coming home alone," says Nicholas ; " she must have been to Variville to see old Mother Bloche, who is dying of cancer."

He gazes at his own last footprints placed heavily on the earlier marks—his thick soles crushing the fainter traces, trampling them as if in panic. Raising his head, he sees his sister's eyes full of tears.

" Come," he says gently, " we must go in."

And they resume their walk, but this time in the grass that borders the path, with their eyes fixed on the track where the kind slow figure walks before them.

The soil soon becomes harder, the footprints fainter. Still, here and there are the light marks of a heel. Outside the covert, these too disappear.

Nicholas looks at the rainclouds in the sky. A few drops have already fallen. If a shower comes down, the earth, even in the furthest recesses of the woods, will be soaked and washed—will cease to remember.

But as evening closes in, there is another spot where thoughts are not blown hither and thither, at the mercy of

winds and odours, a spot where they are focused on the event, consider it steadily, dwell on it insistently, ruminate over it slowly. This is the linen-room in the attic. Mlle Cheu has taken refuge there with the old hunch-backed laundry-maid, Babet, and is sitting near the dormer-window to catch the last few remaining rays of daylight. Not knowing how to make her eternal black dress show signs of deeper mourning, she has stuck her hands into black gloves which, useless as they are, she has kept on ever since morning and which gives her gestures a kind of funereal pomp. Seated on the only chair in the room, she watches Babet folding dusters. The mighty of this world are like lofty citadels, looking four-square to all the winds of heaven. She thinks of the children of the family as if they were so many towers girdling the walls of a fortress. If their sky should be darkened in one direction, they none the less keep their light and their horizon. But for them—the two retainers—it is a question of existence itself. The best part of their past is over and done with and all the little future that remains to them is involved in what the catastrophe may bring forth. And they scrutinise it eagerly and closely, by the help of their own lights, which illuminate things in places only, and as it were at their roots. And though, as a rule, Mlle Cheu has to exercise constant circumspection to preserve her humble prestige, this is not the moment to keep oneself to oneself and stand on one's dignity. The little hunchback certainly has a question on the tip of her tongue, but she does not dare ask it, and this enables Jenny Cheu to be a little more forthcoming. And to whom else can she confide her anxieties ? Other people seem to scorn them. She makes up her mind :

" And you haven't heard the worst. *She* is coming to-morrow."

Towels and dusters may wait. Babet is struck all of a heap. " She is coming to-morrow," repeats Mlle Cheu more decidedly.

" It's not possible," says Babet stoutly.

"Not only is she coming, but the grand ladies from Paris are to be invited to sleep here, so as to spare them a night in the train."

"I won't believe it," replies Babet, "'till I've seen it."

"And what you'll see will astonish you. A great big woman with a yellow skin and black teeth. And she fancies she can live by her charms!"

The hunchback makes it a point of honour not to be convinced:

"In the first place how can you be sure?"

"Well, as you may suppose, I couldn't enquire straight out. So this morning I asked Mme de Sinnis, casually as it were, how many people were expected. But I had chosen my time badly. She was in a hurry. She answered just anything—that we should manage somehow. Of course we shall manage. But this afternoon, I was more successful. I said: 'We shall have Mme Linière, I suppose, and Mme Milien . . . ?' I mentioned those two cousins to see whether she would name the third."

"Well?"

"She said quite calmly, 'And Mme Tavernier.'"

Babet this time has nothing more to say and Mlle Cheu goes on:

"I was so upset that I answered, 'I thought as much' rather too sharply. Then, will you believe it, she looked at me and answered, almost with a smile, 'We none of us care for our cousin Tavernier much, but for Heaven's sake, Jenny, what has the women done to you?' (I could hardly believe my ears.) As if it was *I* who had a grievance! As if I was thinking of my own interests! It was too much! I began to cry. She's kind; she saw she had hurt me and she began to talk me round. She even kissed me. 'If Mme Tavernier chooses to come to-morrow, we can't prevent her,' she said. 'She just wants to show she belongs to the family. We won't take any notice of her, that's all.' (That's just what my lady wants—to be left alone to manage her affairs!) She said too, 'She's gone off the rails a bit, I know.

But as it seems her unpleasant affair with that man is broken off, don't let's judge her, my dear Jenny. Let bygones be bygones!' She said it as if she was tired out. All the same, I couldn't help answering, 'A person like that to be at your mother's funeral!'"

Babet begins again after a pause:

"Madame Jourdaine never will see any harm in anything."

To which Mlle Cheu retorts:

"And you my good soul, see a good deal more than there is!"

"I suppose I know what I heard with my own ears."

"One can't hear words distinctly when one's in the dressing-room. You told me you had a tray in your hands and not your ear to the keyhole."

"They were talking loud enough, Mademoiselle, for there to be no need to listen at the keyhole. Madame was very angry. And to think no one ever heard them raise their voices before!"

"You drew wrong conclusions."

"Really!" says the little hunchback.

Mlle Cheu's indignation rises.

"A great deal might be said, no doubt, but not what you think! Certainly not that!"

Unpardonable weakness to confide in an inferior! Jenny feels herself degraded—open to the charge of treason. She waves her black hands in agitation.

"You're disloyal, Babet. No one could accuse him of such baseness."

But even if there *is* a funeral to-morrow, the washing must be finished, and Babet returns to her dusters.

"At his age!" exclaimed Mlle Cheu vehemently, exasperated by such obstinate folly.

Her companion never so much as turns round. Then Jenny Cheu rises from her chair in wrath.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" she cries.

But the pile of dusters goes on getting higher and higher.

V

It is the custom to carry them out feet foremost, so that they may imagine they are leaving home of their own accord ; so that going, as it were, willingly, to their new abode, they may lose all wish to return. But the desire of Saint Saturnin, on the contrary, would be rather to help them raise their heads so that they may take good note of the way, of the doors, of the place where the keys are kept. Saint Saturnin never gives up any of its own people, nor any position it has once conquered ; and its own people are the only conquest it deigns to be proud of. Another voice has been added to the chorus of its dead ; not imperious, it is true, not intrusive—a voice that takes its part modestly, in unison with the others. But Saint Saturnin has vitality enough to answer it with a fresh chorus of youthful voices. (What a fatal hour strikes for those houses that are poor in children, when the balance secretly shifts, when the weight of the past suddenly prevails, and the people of the tombs begin to impose their law !)

Yesterday Nick's children had begun by crying. Their minds had fluttered here and there like startled birds whose nest has been disturbed, turning in narrow circles, swiftly noting the points touched by the disaster. Who will commiserate with them now over their bruises and their chilblains ? Whose room will they visit for their morning's kiss to come out again with their cheeks bulging with barley-sugar ? And their salads ? Who now will buy their scanty lettuces that take so long to grow, at the same price that Cook pays for the fattest in the market ? It won't be worth while having a garden.

Then, seizing on a suggestion someone lets fall, they set to work to make a wreath. They are allowed to ransack string-boxes, play havoc with the string, cover the floor with

litter. The day is too solemn for them to be worried over a torn pinafore. Doubts are cast on their skill ; they work like niggers, begin over and over again, tug at their knots with might and main. They could almost bowl their hoop of greenery now without its coming undone. Their hands are black and covered with rows of blisters. Never have they pricked such lovely drops from any before. They are sad with enthusiasm ; they have no lessons ; they walk about on tip-toe, astonished at the bustle, absorbed by their discoveries.

But to-day has been even stranger and more agitated. They have a secret whose depths they have not yet explored ; without making them unhappy, it never leaves them. They, who were supposed to be busy over their childish games, they, Lise and Jacquou, *have seen* . . . and no one else suspects it.

Not that they have been forbidden to go into the death-chamber. Their father has taken care to say in their presence :

" If they want to see their grandmother, let them do as they please."

They had pretended not to hear, taking immediate refuge in those dark regions in which the young of men, like animals, mysteriously concoct and concert their actions without the help of speech. Not that they are afraid of their father, but only of the solemn looks the grown-ups might put on. If anyone took it into his head, for instance, to hold their hands . . . or whisper in a strange voice . . . or if at the last moment they were seized with terror . . .

They have been along the landing a dozen times. First one said to the other, " Let's go and fetch the books out of the school-room." Then the other suggested, " Hadn't we better go downstairs and see if there aren't any more envelopes to stamp ? " But never a word as to the reason of all these journeys. Each time someone had met them on the way, or else they had heard voices in the room. At last, by some chance, it had happened that the door had been

ajar. No noise anywhere. Lise, the more resolute of the two, though she is only nine and Jacquou eleven, had looked at her brother. They had listened, they had gone up to the door and had pushed it open just far enough to let them slip in edgeways. First of all, they had seen nothing but the wide mahogany panel of the head of the bed straight in front of them, and above it just the white tip of a pillow. They had had to take at least six more steps, between each one of which they had been on the brink of flight. Then, craning their necks, they had caught sight of a big white nose—a cheek. . . . A minute later, without having dared turned round on the way, they had been back again in their school-room, each one bending, apparently immersed, over an open book. Jacquou, however, had not been able to resist the itch of saying in a whisper, " Did you see ? " To which Lise had replied by merely shrugging her shoulders. Did he take her for a bat ?

In the evening they had been allowed to sit up for their Louis cousins. They had gone down to the hall and settled them selves in a sort of dark cupboard under the stairs, which for four generations has gone by the name of the " Rathole"—a sanctum of sanctums, into which playthings, folding chairs, fishing tackle—thousands of heterogeneous objects are stowed away, and from whose recesses some forgotten treasure, some fragment mouldy with age, is from time to time brought to the surface, as from a dive into the abysses of the sea.

They have left the door open—not from fear—oh no, but in order to hear the car sooner and to meet their cousins on the threshold ; so that, with their new-found experience, they may compare themselves with these cousins of theirs, who have *seen nothing*, who won't be able to see *anything*. For if one can't be positive about Fernand (he is at school, and what's more, in Switzerland) it is quite certain that, in spite of her stuck-up airs, Laurette has never seen a dead person, nor Marianne either ; as for Willy, he's not worth mentioning, he's so small—only eight.

And in fact they are the first to hear the car and to run out on to the steps in the rain. But then Uncle Louis comes downstairs in his turn. The new arrivals kiss him amidst a confused buzz of whispered talk. The cousins are much too dazed with sleep to pay any attention to two mites they have known ever since they can remember. Besides, Jacquou and Lise themselves are petrified by the strange sight of their aunt Reine covered with a veil like a bride—only black ! Oh, how ugly she looks !

VI

ONCE upon a time there were two sisters, Renée and Reine. . . .

No one ever disputed the fact that Reine was the more brilliant of the two, and no one was surprised that it was she and not her elder sister who was the first to carry off the love of a determined young man. After eighteen years of married life, Reine has not only kept the brilliancy of her hair and complexion, she has kept the confidence bestowed by the instantaneous triumph of her beauty (for Louis's decision had been taken suddenly in the course of a dinner-party, where he had refused every dish that the footman had tried to thrust between his fair neighbour and himself). She has kept too the prestige of not having at once surrendered, for she had several handsomer suitors at the time and had at first hesitated. (To have been the less desirous of the two, to have been the one to bestow and not the one to receive, to have been less anxious for one's chains than one's fellow prisoner, is a privilege that lasts to the end of life.)

But when Renée came to Saint Saturnin, it was slowly, on the contrary, and secretly, that a feeling sprang up between her and Nicholas. The younger sister had entered the house under the auspices of passion, the elder under the sign of friendship. But to the end of life too, the obscure marks of seniority persist—that ineradicable ascendancy of the child who runs and speaks over the infant in the cradle. The cross-marriages of the elder sister with the younger of the two brothers, and of the younger with the elder, have knitted subtle ties between the two couples, and owing to this combination of hierarchies the scales have always been held more or less even between Louis and Nicholas.

It has become a rite : when she arrives at Saint Saturnin,

even before going to her own room, she goes " to Renée's " in the separate wing where Nick lives with his children. But this evening, she has been obliged to spend an hour first with William Colombe. When the party separates at the head of the stairs, Nicholas's thoughts seem far afield (excusable certainly) or else he would have gone down a step or two and invited his sister-in-law to follow him, since the only way to his quarters is out-of-doors by the side entrance. But instead of this, he stands on the landing, a little behind the others. She shakes hands with everyone :

" Good-night, Nick."

He stutters something and she repeats :

" Good-night."

Then he makes up his mind to say :

" I have had the communicating door unfastened."

So that's it—his rooms can be reached now from inside, by the passage. Fortunately, she is accustomed to his language.

" Then I'll go and give the children a kiss," she says.

The door in question, on which there are still to be seen remnants of the hangings that have been recently and hastily removed, stands at the end of the passage—a rampart, set up in days gone by, with the uncompromising determination of youth to defend its privacy, and jealously maintained until the present time. Reine thinks indeed that this absurd fellow, who spends all his evenings devouring books, would have much more sensible ideas if he took a greater part in the common life. But it was Renée who had desired this isolation even more than he, and this is sufficient reason for keeping it up at all costs.

" It's only for the time being you've un-nailed the door, isn't it, Nick ? " (She says "isn't it ? " in just the same tone of voice as her sister.) " You won't be wanted in the house so often now."

She doesn't hear Nicholas's murmured answer, for he has just led the way into Jacquou's room. He knows besides perfectly well that this is not the moment in which he will

be attended to ; that once over the threshold—and perhaps even before they are half-way across the ante-room—the obscure and charming miracle will have begun ; he himself, thick-skinned and clumsy, only feels his children's radiant presence when he is touching or looking at them ; but it is from much further away that the invisible halo these small beings wear stirs some sacred spot in the heart of the careless creature beside him. One has only to see her with her four children—and Renée's two hold the same place in her love, unchallenged by either avowed thought or secret impulse—one has only to see her, so fresh as she is and still, as it were, so imbued with youth herself, so calm and easy under the weight of these six young lives, even-tempered and patient (she, in other ways so flighty), unmindful of fatigue, unflurried by difficulties, full of foresight, full of skill (and yet she can do nothing with her fingers) and one is filled with admiration of such simple, unconscious genius.

"Oh Nick, what a baby ! He's gone to sleep with his engine in his arms."

"He has no self-confidence, poor little chap," the father murmurs as if apologising. "He always wants comforting."

She does not allow herself to be touched.

"But you mustn't."

Gently, firmly, she opens the little hand. The sleepy child resists, groping for the treasure that has been snatched from him. Then a deep sigh expresses the sorrow of defeat and the vanquished hand lies at rest on the sheet.

"The other is more sensible," says Nicholas, pushing open the door of the second little room.

Nothing is to be seen here but a tousled head and two clenched fists. The little girl has flung herself upon sleep as if rushing at an obstacle, and has been struck motionless with her face buried in her pillow. Reine kisses the shock of fair hair and follows her brother-in-law into his study.

In two seconds she makes the inventory of the room. Everything is all right ; nothing is changed. Evidently Renée would not have put up with this smell of pipe nor

with all those books piled on one of the chairs, but one mustn't ask too much of a bear like him. She listens to him as he muses aloud.

" Nail up the door again, little Reine ? Shut myself up again with the chicks ? I should be too thankful to. But what is going to become of us ? "

" You mustn't give in, Nick. You really mustn't."

" I shall have to perhaps and it's a sacrifice I dread like a coward. My only hope—I hardly dare say so—is that my father won't want to see me at his table every day. With Louis or Jourdaine, it would be different. But you know, in his secret heart, he's not very proud of his younger son ; he considers me, without showing it too much, as the failure of the family."

" Hush, Nick. You mustn't say such abominable things."

All very well, but if he is mistaken in his pessimism, how does she hope he will be able to save his independence ?

" I am wrong, I own, to talk about my own worries, when yours are so much more serious."

She gives him a re-assuring account of the boy she has left in Switzerland and their conversation continues for a few moments—a somewhat absent-minded exchange of small news.

For below their spoken words another dialogue is renewed —an old dialogue of mute questions never asked and never answered—eternal debate between their secret thoughts.

" Why, Nick, why, do you hide her photograph on a corner of your writing-desk, as if you were ashamed of your fidelity, or as if you were secretly clearing the ground for a cowardly flight ? "

" Why, Reine my dear, why does that hard look suddenly pierce through all your sweetness and stab like a thorn ? You think and always will think that I, and I alone, am to blame for the misfortune, and, uncompromising little soul that you are, you refuse to disarm."

" Ah, Nick, incomprehensible creature, how wretched I should have been with you But since she declared her cup

of happiness was full, I must do what I can to be fond of you."

" Ah, Reine, you charming bunch of courage and caprice ! But how far sweeter, how far more penetrating was *her* perfume ! "

VII

Groups like black caterpillars are winding away from the churchyard on all the roads, and the peasants' chatter, so long repressed, makes up for lost time beside the sheltering hedgerows.

" They took their places just in the same order as at Mr. Victor's funeral in '92. Well I remember it, bless you ! Mr. William next the railing and all the ladies and gentlemen after him—they were young folk then. He drew lots for the army the same year as old Noppe that's dead and gone, did Mr. William. And they were both took with the rheumatics at the same age. There's only one thing Mr. William had as lief not do like old Noppe, and that's to follow him to where he's gone now ! As gay as a lark, the old boy is. Did you notice when the procession was going through the hall, it stopped all of a sudden. There was a stamping and shuffling like on market-day at the *octroi*. And wasn't I longing to get to the door for fear of slipping on their cursed fine polished floors ? So I stretches out my neck—and what should I see ? Ah, ha ! Madam Zéphirine, aren't you ashamed to be letting him court you and you refusing to let go of his hand, so that the whole procession was held up ? Don't you dare be saying I lie. And yet it's the first time ever I saw Mr. William paying any woman a bit of attention. It's true he's a widower now. ' Yes,' says he, ' we're both as solid as bricks and mortar. You're able to read your book without glasses and I've got my grandfather, the General's health that many a young fellow might envy me.' Mr. Louis kept trying to make them move on, but your mouth was watering, eh, Mother Zéphirine ? You wanted more and more. Mme de Sinnis was red in the face. Vexed she was, and I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't stopped your tricks. You should have said,

'That's true, Mr. William, but all the same, the General that's dead and gone had hardened his seat on his horse's back, more than ever you did in your arm-chair. For they do say that to his dying day he always slept on a plank.' And that's the living truth, for one day the coachman Amable—you remember Amable?—showed me a queer kind of article in the loft up at the big house. It was summat like a grocer's counter, with a number of little drawers in it, and on the top was a leather mattress no thicker than your finger. That's where he slept, and if the fancy moved him for anything in the night, he had but to stretch out his hand and there it was in one of the drawers. Ah! he was a queer one, he was! And it's small wonder all his children and grandchildren have a kink in their brains—not like the rest of the world—not they!"

In other groups, they argue:

"Why should anything be changed now, you fool, since all the land is Mr. William's?"

"Mighty clever you are, but how do you know he hasn't signed a paper with Mr. Nicholas?"

"The proof he hasn't, is that it's Mr. William who still pays the taxes. Bichu, Maître Ramelle's clerk, told me so."

"Well, you won't get me to believe Mr. Nicholas hasn't taken his precautions."

And elsewhere:

"Do you know what Mr. William said to Cudorge, the road-mender up at Tourettes? He had got out of his car and was taking a little turn by himself on the road. And he began chatting of this and that, the parishes and the roads and so on. And Cudorge answered and answered and kept wondering all the time what he could be driving at. At the end, says he, Mr. William shook him by the hand, 'You know all the countryside, Cudorge,' says he; 'a fine election agent you'd make.' And he gave him a little wink, says Cudorge, 'a funny, rascally little wink.' . . ."

" That's a good story, that is. Why, Mr. William wouldn't ever even so much as consent to be Mayor ! "

" I'm just repeating what I heard : ' A fine election agent you'd make !' "

" Then you're wishing the poor old gentleman to come to a bad end ? Is it Cudorge would be the one to hoist his carcass on to the platform—or would Mr. Nicholas prop him up to prevent him from falling ? "

In the carriages the conversation is more circumspect.

" Very brave ! "

" But rather confused and upset. Would you believe it, he took me for Mme Aguilin ? "

" Worn out by work. The prefect was very eloquent about it in his speech—the anxiety of such vast undertakings—the load of such great responsibilities ! "

" A perfect married life. One doesn't like to think what such a man must suffer."

" I think he'd have stumbled on leaving the churchyard, if it hadn't been for the lady whose arm he took. Did you notice her ? Rather tall and a little past her prime . . . with big solitaire ear-rings. Someone of the family, I suppose. A distant relation, no doubt. No one has ever seen her here before."

VIII

NICHOLAS meets Jourdaine on the ill-lighted staircase and takes her by the arm.

"Do you hear those idiots laughing? Do you hear the noise they make talking even here? I had to leave the drawing-room—I couldn't bear it."

"Do you prefer the long faces they pull out of sympathy?" she answers. "At any rate, they're natural now. They've spent a pleasant day in the country."

But Nicholas's patience has given way. "Much they care about the country! They are enjoying themselves in the Saint Saturnin drawing-room. It's the first time they've ever felt at ease in it."

"And the last!" says she. "To-morrow morning this bad dream will be forgotten. . . . Have you seen Louis?"

"It's not a dream, my dear, it's not a dream. What did Louis want?"

"He wants us to go to his room later on."

"What's happened now?"

"I don't know. . . . Come, Nick, don't get into a state. I'll soon make them understand they had better go."

"That big ivy cross, that was on the coffin," he says abruptly, "have you any idea where the servants have put it?"

"What do you want it for?"

Without explaining, he turns to go downstairs, when in her turn Reine comes out of the drawing-room, sees them and joins them on the stairs.

"I proposed taking your father back to his room, but he got cross. He seems to be afraid of being left alone. It's he who's encouraging them to tell all those stories."

"And Ninette Tavernier," adds Nicholas, "is trembling

lest she should have to leave without being able to put in her little request for a donation."

" If that's what she wants," cries Jourdaine, " let her see Father alone and have done with it."

" Her teeth are too long," says Nicholas.

" If the poor creature is really in want . . ."

They stop talking to listen. Will they soon have to take to eavesdropping ? Nicholas's mood is not conciliatory.

" She has managed to get a few tidy sums lately. At least, so I gathered from a rather odd hint the accountant dropped. No really, she had much better be encouraged to try her last chance of getting a lover."

Jourdaine tries to silence him.

" For Heaven's sake ! They'll hear you ! "

But Reine mutters indignantly :

" Over fifty and with that face ! "

" Oh ! " replies Nicholas, " provided she doesn't look too high, she has the remains of a social position which may be worth a good deal to her."

And he leaves them and makes for the front door.

" Are you certain," asks Reine, " that they are all going to-morrow morning ? I heard Father making plans for the day. Do go back into the drawing-room. It's all abominable."

Again the sound of voices reaches the hall, Jourdaine carried away by anger runs downstairs. (Jourdaine, the impetuous little girl, the passionate little girl, who had worn out her mother's patience for so long, who in the end was herself worn out by her mother. Such is the fruit of their joint efforts—a woman tamed. Not to let little things get the better of her. It is to such meek and timid stoicism as this, that the great indignations of her childhood have been reduced. But after all, *is* this a little thing :—the profanation of a day like this ? But she knows well enough that before she gets to the door, she will have vanquished this feeble revolt, that she will open the door gently and go into the room quietly. . . .)

She opens it and her entry is barely noticed. Her husband is talking to two men at the other end of the room. The noise comes from the other group. At this moment it is her father who is talking, in too loud a voice and with too excited a face.

"And when they understood my determination was inflexible," he is saying, "they scurried away like hares!"

She has no idea what he can be telling these three foolish women with so much animation, but she has never heard him speak before with such vehemence.

"Like regular hares!" he repeats more emphatically still.

But the words are hardly out of his mouth, when she sees him raise his head and look in her direction with an expression of amazement. The little murmur of flattering admiration stops suddenly short. They all turn round with anxious faces. The silence is absolute. She looks behind her and sees Nicholas advancing through the open doorway carrying the great ivy cross.

He walks the whole length of the room without stopping, till he reaches the fireplace, stands the foot of the cross on the ground and props it up against the marble mantelpiece. He takes his time, shifts it a little to the left, arranges some of the twigs, prolongs the silence and the discomfort pitilessly. That morning the room had been turned into a chapel—let it remain so a little longer! Then, without looking at anyone, he goes to join Jourdaine. For that evening, at any rate, an end has been put to this unseemly laughter.

The visitors, slightly puzzled, finally rise to their feet, expecting perhaps some kind of ceremony. When Nicholas turns away without an explanation, their embarrassment increases. One of them looks at his watch; others imitate him. They apologise for the lateness of the hour, and take their leave with subdued voices. One by one they go up to the old man. In vain he protests, tries to detain them as they shake his hand.

" Stop, I beg . . . Won't you stop. . . ."

But he too in the general discomfort speaks below his breath so that no one dares be persuaded by such an inaudible murmur. And the door finally shuts on the last of the intruders.

Now the great cross stands there in the centre of the room, as though on a deserted battlefield ; a sombre figure clothed in leaves, it seems to reign alone in the darkness of the funeral night.

William Colombe casts a look round the room as if he were summing up hostile forces. The cross ? All right ! It does very well where it is. Do they imagine he is embarrassed by it or that they can teach him the respect due to the dead ? But if they have determined he shall meditate in solitude, well, what are they waiting for there, all four of them ? They look as if they hardly knew themselves. . . . And with an abrupt wave of his hand he dismisses them.

Jourdaine goes up to him.

" Oh ! " he cries crossly, guessing what she no doubt means to say, " put the children to bed first."

She does not insist. He had expected she would insist and his displeasure shifts its ground. Making his voice as plaintive as he can :

" If Reine will be so obliging," he begins, and then corrects himself :

" If Reine would be so exceedingly kind as to come with me to my room."

It can't be helped, Reine must be waited for upstairs. Louis wants them all to be present when he opens the envelope Mlle Cheu has just found in Elisabeth's writing-desk. It is inscribed " For our children " and is sealed with black sealing-wax and stamped with the signet grandfather Victor Colombe wore at his watch-chain and always used—an oval ground engraved with the motto, " Simplices sicut Columbæ."

With his bald forehead and his frowning brows, Louis has the rather grim expression he puts on for important company meetings. (No levelling will ever do away with the secret pact between fathers and their eldest sons. The eldest-born stands nearest his father and feels more bound in honour than either of his youngers to defend a collapsing dignity.) Louis sees as well as they do the clouds that are gathering over the house ; but Nicholas has just behaved like a fool and Jourdaine loses her head.

" All right, Jourdaine, shut the door. It's only an old man going to bed."

For the last quarter of an hour they have been listening to the sound of William Colombe's stick coming and going on the carpet of the big landing.

" Here they are again," says Jourdaine.

They wait for the sound to get nearer and then again for it to decrease.

" Every evening," murmurs Nicholas, " Mother used to walk up and down with him as Reine is doing now. But when Reine isn't there . . ."

" Jenny will do it," declares Louis.

" He doesn't like Jenny."

The door opens suddenly and Reine slips into the room.

" Please don't speak so loud. I thought he had gone into his room for the night, but a second or two later he came out again. I just had time to get behind a curtain. I saw him hesitate and listen. Then he took a few steps, then went back to his room. But if he began walking about again . . ."

" We aren't saying anything we don't want him to hear," declares Louis.

" No, no," says Reine, " you mustn't. He's so angry with Nicholas."

Nicholas has great difficulty in getting her to repeat what he said.

" He wasn't in his right mind, my dear Nick. You mustn't let it trouble you. No, he made no allusion to the guests' leaving. But he had any number of other grievances ! The

thinning of the woods, the plantations, the kind of manure you use, your extraordinary vagary of choosing a Russian for your bailiff. One reproach was hardly formulated before another came tumbling out, as if he had a long list of them prepared beforehand. And even the way you bring up Lise and Jacquou."

" Is that all ? "

She is still hot with indignation.

" I told him he didn't deserve to have such sons."

" You were wrong, my dear. But what else did he say ? "

She is clearly unwilling to add anything.

" He was tired ; he didn't mean what he said."

Nicholas would be ashamed to insist. He only murmurs :

" Perhaps it was because he was tired that he said what he meant."

And, sitting down, he signs to his brother to begin.

Louis slits open the envelope without breaking the seal and unfolds a double page.

" The beginning is in Father's handwriting."

Jourdaine makes a sign to him to stop, gets up and shuts the inside shutters. Then, when all is silent, the elder brother begins to read :

Saint Saturnin
My seventieth birthday

My dear children

You have all gathered together to make this a day of solemn rejoicing. And indeed, it is a decisive date in the career of a man who has lived long years of laborious activity, and is now quitting the occupations of a life-time to enter into what will no doubt be his final retirement. You have loaded me with your good wishes and I have thanked you from my heart. But when now I think of the words in which I expressed my thanks—the last words, perhaps, I shall ever address you in common—they strike me as so brief, so curt, that I should like to add something more to them, to make them more nearly resemble my meaning. I have always thought it a mistake to wait till one is overtaken by the decrepitude of age in order to make room for

the younger generation. If we wish to cast no shadow on our children's affection, we should not tempt them too sorely to wish us out of the way. Should one of you ever feel inclined—I will not say to look forward to my departure with impatience—but simply to dream of the facilities it might give him, it would be enough to poison the whole fruit of my past exertions and make me think my life had ended in failure. Louis is now firmly established in all the affairs in which I am interested and has succeeded me with such energy and spirit that none of the ground gained by my father and myself is in danger of being lost. Jourdaine has adopted her husband's ambitions and is in a position to assist him in his career and help him uphold our country's rank abroad. And lastly Nicholas, the least favoured of the three, disposes of a field of action at Saint Saturnin which is modest, it is true, but which he declares he prefers to any other. Our old house could not be in better hands. Let him keep it—symbol as it is of some of the robuster virtues—for it could not fall into the possession of strangers without endangering the continuity and union of our family.

I may then, without scruple, consider my task accomplished and lay down a burden which has sometimes been heavy. If my grandfather's courage succeeded in overcoming so many obstacles, it was in the hopes of making good the dreams that perished in an extraordinary catastrophe by an achievement that was extraordinary too. If my father in his turn showed so much intelligence and activity, though in a different line, it was to smother the constant pain of a mortal blow to his tenderest affections. As for me, I have worked solely for you, constrained myself for your sakes, to a life of self-denial, and given myself neither respite nor indulgence in the course of it. It has not always been an easy thing to improve on my predecessors—to add to their building. I am not thinking of an increase of fortune, which hardly deserves consideration, nor of the possibilities of leisure which I make no doubt none of you will take advantage of. You will work, I feel sure, as much as I have done ; but you will be able to choose the work that is especially adapted to your capacities and talents. So that the old tree, as it branches out with greater diversity, will none the less continue to grow.

The time has now come for me to acknowledge—and I do so

without bitterness, and even with a certain unlooked for joy—that "I must diminish and you must increase." I have tried to become unnecessary, and now here I am out of the game, without any of those vain ambitions in which old people generally take pleasure—happy to be able to live at last in a country I am fond of, to watch the changing seasons of the year, and to give your mother the calm retreat she has always longed for.

When I was a child and learnt that the mountains of the earth were condemned eventually to perish, worn away by the action of water, I was filled with such pity for our poor little hill of Fahy, my heart was so smitten by the thought of its helplessness against the hostility of men, beasts and weather, that I never climbed it without taking with me one or two stones or a pocketful of sand. I can still interest myself as passionately in things of no practical bearing, and still muse over astronomical figures. So I shall have no regrets at leaving a life of activity which was often harassing, no difficulty in adapting myself to the calm of my rural retreat.

I intend to take no posthumous steps, not because I shrink from considering my death, but because I have more confidence in your uprightness and mutual affection than in measures which, if I settled on them to-day, might cease to be suited to the circumstances of to-morrow. No doubt you would consider my decisions just, but what you decide yourselves will be better.

As he reads, Louis's voice has grown firmer, in the proud assurance of having so nobly won his wager. "You see," he seems to say, "you children of little faith! And if I doubted like you, I am ashamed. . . ."

The envelope contained another piece of paper, now lying on the table. Jourdaine hands it to her brother. It consists only of a few lines in Elisabeth's handwriting. He reads:

I can add nothing of any importance to what your father has just written. I think of each of you, Louis, Jourdaine, Nicholas, and of the happiness you have each given us, and my heart overflows with a gratitude I wish I could express but cannot. At the moment when the last stage of our life is beginning, I feel seized

with fear ; for though fate has dealt me a cruel blow in striking at the happiness of my youngest son, it has not brought me my rightful share of trials in the course of all these long years. But if it continues to smile on me, I will accept its gifts with simplicity and gratitude, and in the same spirit I hope, in which I should bow my head to its strokes.

After the signature, follow a few more words :

Since we have written two copies of the above, it is these pages you will find if I am the first to leave you. I wish to add nothing but this request : old age is a difficult burden ; take my place beside the companion of my life. Do not forget that what he has written is exactly true—in his laborious and honourable career, you were his only thought. Be patient, even if a great deal of patience is needed. Help him in his solitude.

It is as though Elisabeth had bent down to whisper in their ears, murmured her request, thanked them with a smile. She knows there is no need to insist.

But an objection springs into Louis's mind, What ! when his parents retired to Saint Saturnin six years ago, what ! was his mother already so uneasy ? He holds the paper to the light and scrutinises it. There is relief in his voice when he says :

" The postscript is not in the same ink."

They all look at the writing in turn.

" You see it's blue—quite different from the first part. The last lines must be recent."

" Yes," says Jourdaine. " I remember that ink. But it's a long time ago since she used it."

" How long ? " asks Louis. " Are you certain ? I should like to compare it with a letter written last spring."

" A long time, I'm sure. Not since . . ."

Her sentence is cut short. The sound of a stick is coming nearer. . . . Was he listening ? Had he heard ? . . . There is a knock at the door. . . . Impossible not to open and Louis does so immediately.

The old man stands on the threshold. He did not expect apparently to see so many of them. What are they plotting there all together?

" Haven't you gone to bed yet? " he says.

Some people might try more artful methods ; but Louis will not consent as yet to be artful. The old man does not deserve to be spoken to otherwise than openly. Upright before his father, he says with a touch of solemnity :

" We have found among the papers Mother has left us a few pages in your handwriting, written on your seventieth birthday. We have just been reading them. We were very much touched by them and I want to thank you in all our names."

He stands almost at attention. Those who know his voice hear a little tremble in it. His frank face seems waiting for an answer.

It does not come at once, as though the old man's mind were hesitating among dim memories.

" Well," he says at last, " try not to be ungrateful."

Louis does not move a muscle. His father, for that matter, does not allow him time to think of an answer.

" I came to ask," says he, " whether there are two cars ordered for to-morrow? "

As Louis does not answer, it is Nicholas who says :

" Yes, two."

" Oh, well, it doesn't matter. Never mind. . . . It's of no importance."

And to stop further questioning, he shuts the door behind him.

They listen to him going down the passage. Someone murmurs :

" If two cars won't be wanted, it means that they aren't all five leaving."

There is a flutter. But no, not this evening. Patience! Elisabeth's request still lies on the table. " Patience—even if a great deal is needed. . . . "

And yet it would have been better if they had brought

their anxiety to the surface and looked it squarely in the face, for now each of them carries it away with him, hidden but still vaguely present, lurking in all the intervals of thought. It visits each of them in disguise, clothed in the phantoms born of fatigue and night, wearing the aspect of his own habitual cares, his dearest torments.

Why should Jourdaine start when she feels her husband slip his hand on to her arm, as she regains her room?

"I wish," he says with almost tender concern, "I wish so much I could help you in your trouble, my dear."

What magic is there in a voice that is neither warm nor caressing, and sometimes indeed hoarse and harsh? And yet there are hearts into which it steals with such insidious melancholy that, lulled into forgetfulness, they drop their arms. Is it really necessary for him to add:

"We haven't exchanged three words since I arrived. I was very fond of your mother—very. When you were misguided enough to accept a husband like me, she welcomed me more affectionately than anyone. I have always remembered it."

All that is needed to shake an ill-defended heart is this note of sadness in the voice, this touch of a hand that, having little either of beauty or of strength, is yet able to command without even a pressure of the finger-tips. . . . Jourdaine has not asked him to come into her room, but neither has she disengaged her arm at the door, so that he follows her in.

"You did whatever you liked with her, poor thing," she murmurs.

"Oh no, you're wrong. She often spoke to me very severely; but she knew how to choose the words that were the most likely to touch me."

"And yet you know I never complained."

Yes, he knows it, and no one appreciates more than he the dignity that has thrown a protecting mantle of silence over a ruined life. But Jourdaine is no beggar for pity.

"Those days are past, my dear. Don't let's think of them."

With all the prudence she is mistress of, she has braced herself never to accept a favour, to show a self-effacement greater even than is demanded, in order to reserve all her strength for the only quarrel she takes to heart nowadays—the quarrel that is waged over their son. But there must be no slipping into it to-night. It would be neither decent nor tactful. She has sworn to herself not to slip into it. But prowling anxiety is on the look-out for some spectre that can lend it a face and a voice, and it is on this that it seizes, this that it puts forward, so that when Jourdaine opens her mouth, it is to say:

"I've just had a letter from Gilbert . . ."

What is the good? What is the good? But it's too late to draw back now:

". . . or rather a pencil scrawl. He had written it just an hour after arriving at his new post, in the middle of a great field of snow, right at the top of Atlas."

Let him approve, if only with a nod of his head, the boy's courage, or else she will be obliged to go on, with a sore heart at having to plead his cause.

"He writes that he knows all his hundred Arab soldiers by name already, and that he is the only white man on a front of fifty kilometres—a real mountain prince, with his little people to rule over."

"Since that's the profession he has chosen . . . !" is all the father murmurs.

His want of sympathy wounds her, goads her into becoming provocative:

"You won't believe, I suppose, what his colonel said to me—that he had never known anyone learn the Arab dialects so quickly, and that he was the admiration of everyone for the way he had managed to bring his little detachment through without any killed or wounded."

But Amédée de Sinnis loses all control of himself when there is a question of Gilbert's danger.

" How proud you are," he flings out, " to know he's in a place where people are astonished there are no killed and wounded."

" Would it be better," she begins, like a person striking with his eyes shut, " if he were in London, in the drawing-room of . . ."

She is on the point of mentioning the name of a woman, whom by a tacit convention they both avoid alluding to, but she pulls herself up just in time to preserve the fragile friction.

" . . . that lord, whose name I have forgotten—the one who has ten gardeners—all more beautiful than angels—to look after a garden no bigger than a pocket-handkerchief? "

" And what about his hundred Arab soldiers ? " he is on the point of retorting. But no ; they are too old for such pin-pricks. He turns the attack, finds just the right thing to say so as to be able to retire with the satisfaction of feeling he has been the wiser of the two. She too plays her part in the heart-breaking game. She is well trained. She has style and distinction. Her simplest dress is in perfect taste. If he doesn't get Prague or Vienna this year it won't be for want of a wife equal to the duties of her dismal task.

" The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." The torment of uneasiness aroused by their old father visits his children in the form of disputes which fall in turn upon his children's children. The torment has no need to vary its methods ; it tries in every case to thrust its beak into the most vulnerable spot. It hovers round the other couple—Reine and Louis. Their hearts too are unlike, but full of such excellent intentions that they manage to employ even their opposing tastes and incommunicable thoughts in rendering each other mutual service and help.

Reine turns over in her mind plans that form and unform, just as her shadow as she moves about the room, now shows distinctly and now melts into the darkness.

"If I suggested going to join Fernand to-morrow in Switzerland, he would conclude I'm not telling the truth when I say I'm not anxious about the child any more. And if I don't go, he'll say, 'How easily the feather-headed creature believes what she wants to!

"Poor fellow!" she goes on musing, "he doesn't know what to think! Great baby that he is, asking himself such absurd questions! He'll never breathe a word aloud, but how well I guess them! He says to himself, 'How can such a weakly constitution have come from me? I am strong. I am healthy I don't know the meaning of failure.'"

With all the concentration of mind of which she is capable, she attempted to establish a solid chain of reasoning—like a man's:

"Man is a reed, my poor darling, and not an oak. We bow our heads and then recover. But you have never admitted that we can be made to bow and so you can't understand how we can recover. (What could he answer to that?) So on that point for all your wisdom, you are blind—blind!"

"I have been thinking," says Louis suddenly, "of the story of the little boy carrying stones to the hill. It sheds a light on many things—a queer love of nature and of abstract speculation which seemed hard to explain. It's easy enough to talk of madness. . . . What then? Even if he does show signs of wearing out, it's more honourable than the good health of old men who have coddled themselves all their lives."

Of course! . . . Reine had almost forgotten. Poor fellow, so proud of his family, and stricken now in what goes before as well as in what follows—caught between two humiliated generations!

Nicholas alone is not rich enough in cares for the new anxiety to attack him in their shape. The menace that threatens him personally he has long foreseen; but it strikes him now with startling distinctness. "It's better to know

the worst. We'll see to-morrow. But for one more night I'll pull my sheet over my head and go to sleep. I'm safe here in my marvellous silence. I'm warm in my bed's embrace, in my delicious glooms."

He has slept for too many years during the war on a few branches covered with a blanket, his back against the mud walls or the planks of a dug-out. The refuge of his bed seems to him a place of almost sacred peace, a place to which one is admitted only by some divine permission, a retreat where one's mind indulges delightfully in its thoughts, as one's body enjoys its own warmth. The permission may very possibly be withdrawn again. It is not written in the stars that a man will always sleep under a roof. There are many parts of the world in which one might be driven from lodging to lodging. And anything may happen to one except to go on living for ever.

He tucks his blankets carefully round him, and then says his nightly prayer :

" Bless me, my darling, bad as I am ! "

IX

"Jenny," says Jourdaine, "I've looked for you a dozen times since this morning. No one could tell me where you were. After my brother Louis had gone, I went up to your room. You weren't there. As Mr. Nicholas had to see to the ploughing, I went out with him, because there are a great many things to be talked over. I came in and still you were nowhere to be found. At last I began to get frightened. Yes, you dear old thing, I didn't know what to think. What an idea to start tidying the loft ! If I hadn't heard your steps, I should never have thought of looking for you up here in the roof. I'm not joking, my dear Jenny, I was anxious.

"Sit down here beside me on this old trunk. You won't ? Come, Jenny, what's the matter ? You're unhappy, and you've stolen up here to be out of the way of all these leave-takings. Mme Louis looked for you after lunch, before getting into the carriage. (She told me to give you her love.) It seems that this morning early, when the horde of cousins were being packed off, she went up to speak to you, but that you ran away. She was afraid she might have offended you, but couldn't imagine how. . . . And now, I don't know what to think. . . . This isn't the time, Jenny, to let fancies creep in between us. I say *fancies*—for they can't be anything else—in face of all the difficulties that lie ahead of us, and that we haven't yet had time to talk over, since we've got that odious woman on our hands.

"What are you astonished at ? Is it perhaps her you are avoiding ? Then try and imagine what it must be like for us to have her with us the whole time—at table, in the drawing-room, in the garden ? Have I guessed right, Jenny ? Don't look at me as if I had committed a murder. It's because of her ? Is that it ? You're indignant that we haven't turned her out of the house ? Well, Jenny, it was

I myself who this morning invited her in the most amiable manner possible to put off going. And I smiled with the utmost politeness. Yes, I, Jourdaine. But not with a very cheerful heart.

" And now, before being shocked, listen to my reasons. We guessed Mme Tavernier had agreed with my father not to leave, but all the same I meant to pretend I knew nothing about it and hustle her off as quickly as I could. So twenty minutes before it was time for her to start, I went to her room under pretext of having her luggage taken down. She acted her little scene quite well, pounced on her watch (she had carefully set it back an hour), exclaimed how dreadful it was, that such a thing had never happened to her before, that she'd be ready in five minutes ! Then she began running about the room this way and that, upset a scent-bottle, shook her watch. My husband often says, ' The first rule, as long as the adversary hasn't given himself away, is not to show that one mistrusts him.' Yes, my poor Jenny, I have learned to play the diplomat too, and when nobody is there to make me blush, I manage it almost as well as anyone. . . . So I hurriedly helped her fold her dresses. Of course all her things, even the most useless, were laid out on the mantelpiece ; of course her dressing-bag was shut and the key mislaid. When she saw she was going to be outmanœuvred by my quickness, she changed her tactics. She said I was the only person who could advise her, that she hadn't managed to see me alone last night, that she was in the greatest embarrassment, that my father insisted in the most pressing way upon her staying. She declared she was afraid of making him angry, but that of course she wouldn't dream of stopping on at such a moment. As for me, I still pretended to believe her and went on hurriedly with the packing. Then she murmured, without seeming to attach much attention to it, ' He threatened to go up to Paris himself, if I didn't obey him. But you'll easily dissuade him from doing anything so foolish.' I'm astonished at myself for making up my mind so quickly (my husband complimented

me on it). I said as innocently as I could, 'But then, Ninette, why such a hurry? Do us the pleasure of stopping till to-morrow.' She didn't actually accept, but she was such a long time protesting she wouldn't, that the car had to start without her.

"My brothers think I was right. That is, Mr. Louis doesn't seem to attach much importance to any of all this. Our prudence seems to him excessive and almost insulting. But you, Jenny, you understand how defenceless old people are and how much they need help.

"Now, dear old thing, come and sit down; give me your hands. Don't be in such a state. She's really a creature who's more to be pitied than feared. You say 'a dangerous woman'; it's giving her a great deal of importance. What are you shaking your head for? You're sure of what? That my mother was uneasy about her? Babet overheard angry words? But in the first place, perhaps Babet misunderstood. Even if my mother did say 'Ninette shan't put her foot inside the house'; even if she did say indignantly, 'You invited her, you must put her off,' it's because everything about the woman must have been shocking to her. It seems there were demands for money too. I didn't know of them. My mother never said anything about such a thing to any of us, but Mr. Nicholas is almost sure of it. I don't think it's necessary to imagine anything else.

"As for what Babet calls 'a violent scene,' you know quite well that no one ever, on any occasion, heard a single sharp word pass between my parents—not even the smallest sign of impatience. Then is it likely? . . . The poor thing's head is turned by reading books about the saints—she's taken to hearing voices too.

"I'm wrong to joke about it, Jenny. I'm not really inclined to. Will I speak to Babet? No, certainly not. How could you dream of such a thing? There's something else? Do speak, Jenny. One has to drag the words out of you one by one. Mother said what? 'If her lover has left her in the lurch, are we to blame?' Come now, it doesn't sound at all

like the kind of thing Mother would say, does it ? And ' You seem very compassionate, I must say ! ' was probably only a reference to the gifts of money I've told you of.

" Oh, Jenny, if you had only seen my poor old father this morning ! When I left the woman's room, I crossed him in the hall. You yourself couldn't have helped feeling sorry for him. I thought I had better speak first, so I said, ' As you wish it, I've asked Ninette not to go till to-morrow.' Then he put his arm round me and said that from the day of my birth his dream had been I should be a kind, patient daughter, that I should understand him and be fond of him. . . . I was really touched. I know well enough, I haven't always been the daughter of his dreams. . . .

" Why, I haven't been up to this loft for twenty years. What heaps upon heaps of things ! What good will that three-legged chair ever be to anyone ? And that carpet-bag ? And those decrepit bellows ? It's not even a hospital you've got here, but a home for incurables !

" I know what you're thinking : ' Why was he so moved ? Why such effusive gratitude ? ' But, dear old thing, what are you imagining ? It's absurd. Fortunately, M. de Sinnis isn't going away till this evening. I'll tell him what you say. No one's advice is more helpful. . . . Come, Jenny, at my father's age ! I tell you it's nonsense. . . . And you know my husband's even more inclined than my brothers to think one oughtn't to allow outsiders to get too much influence over old people. He has persuaded the Louis's to leave us the children for a few days. My father's very fond of them. They will do their lessons with Lise and Jacquou. In a house that's full of children even the worst of women feels hindered in her evil carryings-on.

" One can't blame my brother Louis for leaving. Factories can't be kept waiting. The livelihood of so many people depends on their work. And his wife can't stay here always. And my husband has to go. It can't be helped. Life must go on. To-night we shall be reduced to our own resources. Everything will depend now on Mr. Nicholas.

" There's something else you wanted to say ? Yes, Jenny, yes ! Oh, how tiresome you are ! . . . When do I mean to go away too ? . . .

" Look here, we'll take that old embroidery-frame downstairs. I really believe it was my great-grandmother's. How beautifully made the furniture was in those days ! It's solid mahogany ; and look at those little engine-turned bronze ornaments. . . . It's really time the blue arm-chair had a fresh needlework cover. Patience is less difficult when one's hands are busy. Dear old thing, what had you fancied ?

" But I don't promise to finish the arm-chair. I don't promise anything. . . . It would be such a good thing if I could be in London ! "

PART II

WINTER

I

IN THE novel harshness of a first frosty morning, under a sky only just beginning to grow pale, in the dry and biting air, Nicholas feels the frozen gravel hard under his nailed boots. In summer a man's triumph over laziness fades ingloriously away and evaporates in the gentle warmth of the rising sun. It is only in late autumn that the sleeper, plunging, chilled to the marrow, into the icy springs of dawn, feels the exhilaration of the man who sets in motion the wheels of the day's work. For till past noon, and indeed till supper-time, everything depends on the vigour with which this first hour is attacked. Nothing would make Nicholas abandon his privilege. The first cut of the joint is for him. But it would lose all its flavour (and at the end of every year it comes with a fresh surprise) if, on looking up at the grey sky he did not catch in it a last, faint, supreme sparkle. Hail, trusty stars ! I am up. I am here to relieve you of your guard !

Last night they were busy with their million arrows. Even yesterday a presentiment of the coming massacre was in the air. Towards evening, the last cloud had vanished. Venus, all silvery white, had sailed through the cold green spaces of the sky, and then had taken flight before the awakening of the immense assembly. Little by little, in the pitiless transparence of the heavens, the greater stars had dawned and brightened, soon to be followed by the multitude of their vassals, without a single exception, as if all, to the very smallest, had wished to celebrate the solemn advent of winter, and open with fitting magnificence the assizes of the great purification. It will be of no avail for the sun when it rises to melt the ice-needles that are crackling in the puddles ; no St. Martin now will bring back a semblance of

soft summer weather. It is light enough to see the mass of sumptuous dahlias which a few hours have sufficed to lay low ; and no doubt the garden's insolent abundance of man-invented flowers, overgorged with food and overswollen with sap, is already lying prone in the beds, ready to return once again to the dung-heap. Early morning footsteps ring out merrily on the road. Hail to winter too ! Destroyer of vermin, despoiler of garlands, at whose bar all created things must present themselves stripped and naked. At the entrance to the farm, the ancient lime-trees still keep their yellowing fleeces ; but the fine blades of frost have pierced each leaf at the joint. They will drop every one of them as soon as the air loses its chill ; and this evening the creaking ploughs will come home over ways that have been strewn as though for a festival, while the two trees, their branches and their scars exposed to view, will stand shamefaced by.

The farm servants have already brought the horses out from the stables, where lights are burning, and the great beasts, still half asleep, stand jibbing and steaming in the early dawn. Shadowy figures pass backwards and forwards, hugging their bodies with their arms, as though trying still to retain some lingering warmth of bed. Men and things seem slowly to emerge from the night's receding tide and, with the remnants of its muddy wash still clinging to them, make their way back into the daily round of toil. The tractors reappear, pushed out of their shed. The shovels and picks, which have been propped against the wall for the night, return to their places on the shoulders of men. The water, which has been sleeping in the reservoirs, begins to make itself heard once more in the tank.

The foreign bailiff can be recognised in the distance by the light of his eternal cigarette ; an alien among the throng of home-bred lads, he seems trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible, as though hiding from the blows of fate. While from all sides come good-mornings—

" Good-morning, Mr. Nicholas. . . . Fine weather. . . . A bit sharp . . ."—and the sound of feet stamping to keep warm ; the Russian, stooping over the foot of a filly, mumbles without lifting his head, " Bad shoeing again ! That filthy blacksmith ! Cut the hoof, hammer the nails ! And then people say, ' She's lame—it's rheumatism in the shoulder.' But it's nail and nothing but nail ! "

The man still holds up the hoof while Nicholas feels it, prudently reserving his judgment.

" Well—perhaps. We shall see bye and bye, when she's less stiff on her legs. Go on anyhow, I'll follow you."

He watches the beast as it steadies itself again on its forelegs and backs obediently on to the bar of the plough. Ivanoff, he reflects, detests this blacksmith ; and it's quite true that the hoof has been again pared too much. But then the other smith has quarrelled with the parish, so—oh, confound these politics !

But he has first to visit the stables and see how the two new arrivals are getting on ; the cow-wife can't be bothered with them because they are making a fuss over their bottles. The slut ! She can never be made to understand that a young animal with five generations of aristocracy behind it, all prize ancestors, is worth more than the first-come little ragamuffin of a calf !

Besides he hopes to be on the ground almost as soon as the ploughs, which will have to follow the windings of the road, while he can cut across the wood. At the same time, the short-cut bristles with irresistible temptations ; that ivy there—that impudent bramble—and he cuts them away with one blow of his bill-hook. (For while others may make their rounds with a gun, as an emblem of dignity, on their shoulders, or, if they have quite lost all shame, just carrying a stick, Nicholas only feels happy in the company of this staff of his with its crescent of steel on top.) So that when he comes up with the ploughs, they have already begun work. (Ha ! Here we have one of our Ivanoff's harmless

little dodges ; instead of letting the other plough make a second furrow alongside of his own, he has got rid of it by sending it to the opposite edge of the field, dear talkative fellow ! He takes as much pains to arrange a few moments' chat for himself as another man would for a lovers' meeting. In point of fact, is the mare lame ? It's difficult to see properly from here because of the leading horse. She seems to me to be stepping out as jauntily as I do myself in my comfortable old boots. But Ivanoff will refine on this point with all the elaboration of a poet.)

The team passes close by him without stopping. A good mark for the Russian ! Ivanoff knows that the other plough is keeping an eye on him and will stop whenever he stops ; and the horses only need a breathing space every two turns, Nicholas calls out to him.

" Well, Serge Pavlitch, how's she going ? "

Apparently very well, for Ivanoff, putting on his blackest look, contents himself with an ambiguous, " You can see for yourself, Major."

Nicholas has never been able to dissuade him from using this appellation. In the mind of the ex-lieutenant, it sums up everything it would be too difficult to express in set terms : deference, attachment ; it implies thanks for the use of his patronymic—a thing that always touches him. Nor does either of them ever give the other away ; this is a way of speaking reserved for tête-à-têtes alone.

And the plough goes on over the broad acres of earth on which, here and there, still stand a few apple-trees, last remaining witnesses of the small plots and inconsiderable parcels of land gradually acquired by Saint Saturnin. To the great regret of his ploughmen, Nicholas has never brought himself to permit the cutting down of a single fruit-tree. Let them die of their peaceful old age ! Every year one or other disappears and they all require their last remains of vigour to be assisted by the riddance of their most decrepit branches.

Already Nicholas and his blade are busy among

the mossy limbs of the tree at the foot of which he stands, cutting away the dead wood with sharp, swift strokes.

" You did say, Major, that cutting off dead branches didn't pay for the labour."

" And it's quite true, Serge Pavlitch. What I'm doing now is pure luxury."

The Russian's blue eyes are laughing in his stolid face.

" A luxury not worth the hire of a day-labourer. You don't put your work at a high price, Major."

Nicholas glances at the satin-backed horses, groomed and glossy enough for hunters.

" Your fancy, Serge Pavlitch, is all for horses, and not for trees. The great thing is to have a fancy."

But Ivanoff is not convinced.

" Horses, they can be kept ; you can take them with you ; you can save your life on the back of one. But your apple-trees, that you plant and look after, suppose they are taken from you one day ? "

This time it is Nicholas who laughs.

" Well, there'll still be a few good trees the more in the world. That's all that's wanted."

Ivanoff's face darkens.

" One day they'll want a fire. Wood they can get as much as they like in the forest. But too much trouble to fetch it. Then they'll break off branches from the apple-trees. You don't know them, Major. . . . Come up there, Whitefoot ! "

Nicholas gathers the dead wood and piles it against the tree-trunk. Humble work, most certainly, so humble that the day-labourers are only put on to it to fill up spare time. But would it be caring for the property better, if he went round the place with idle hands ? After all, here we have a good healthy tree—one fruit-bearer the more among all those that fulfil their task for the greater benefit of mankind. Surely it is well worth the jay or the magpie another

man might have shot in the time. He starts on another tree while awaiting the return of the plough. This will be a good opportunity for arranging with Ivanoff the date of his next drinking bout. Because something has happened to upset the family life of the Colombes, it is no reason for taking advantage of a foreigner who is bound by his word of honour. (Twice had it happened that the Russian had been too drunk to manage his men. So ashamed was he after his second breakdown, that he made an attempt to cut his throat. Finally he has allowed Nicholas to dictate terms to him which, though making a great demand on his strength of character, provide full and free opportunities for the indulgence of his weakness. As long as he is on the farm he is not to touch a drop of liquor, but once a month, on some kind of marketing pretext, Nicholas sends him up to town for three or four days, with only a portion of his wages in his pocket.)

"By the by, Ivanoff, I was forgetting to tell you, you may take a holiday from to-morrow, if you like. I'm sorry to have had to depend on you longer than I could have wished."

The Russian looks uncomfortable. "That's not nice of you," he stammers.

"What's not nice?"

"To say you're sorry."

He is worried by not being able to find the words he wants, and comes close up to Nicholas.

"Let me say, Major . . ."

He still hesitates, and then, with the click of his heels which he can never break himself of, "You first," he says. "You go to Paris. I'll stay here."

This is the first time the mutual understanding between the two men has been so clearly expressed. Nicholas too, in his desire to keep up a correct attitude, feels slightly embarrassed—on the surface, at any rate; for if there is a scruple that lies close to his heart and by which his life is ordered, it is that of not allowing himself any greater licence

in the way of material indulgences than he accords to others. And that this equality should be acknowledged pleases a certain sense of manly justice in him.

"No, my dear fellow," he answers simply, "in the present circumstances . . ."

Ivanoff keeps his eyes on the ground, and finally murmurs :

"My own mother died of hunger. . . ."

But he is not asking for sympathy.

"I say that because . . ."

And now he looks up.

"Because you are better than I, Major. Our moujiks adored her ; only they were frightened and didn't dare give her food. . . . When I heard of it, I was in the street in Constantinople. I was going to a woman . . . I mean . . . a prostitute. . . . Well, I went all the same."

"There is no resemblance between what you have had to go through, Ivanoff, and what . . ."

But the man is already taking hold of the plough-handles in order to escape.

"No, no, Ivanoff, listen to me."

The horses give a preliminary pull on the collar but are again stopped.

"Even if I wanted to breathe another atmosphere for a day or two, Serge Pavlitch, it would be impossible just now."

The Russian lifts the share, catches it in a clod, lifts it again.

"But you know, Mr. Nicholas, while you are away . . ."

"Yes, I know perfectly. It wouldn't be the first time I have counted on you."

"No, what I mean is that if there are other things still more difficult—if I hear your orders criticised in front of the staff, well, you may be quite easy. . . . I had a very old uncle of my own—perhaps he might have been eighty ; he began trying to give directions about everything. . . ."

Nicholas sees a cigarette being lighted at the other end of the fields, and breaks into the story of the uncle.

"What, has Mr. William been . . . ?"

"Oh, nothing much. . . . When he was out yesterday with the lady. . . . But the men know they must say, 'Yes, yes,' and go on just as before."

Nicholas puts a good face on it and murmurs :

"Well, it's none of it very serious."

He leaves the plough to get under way again and returns to his pruning. For a second time the little faggot of dead wood is piled up against the tree-trunk—a wretched little faggot, thinks Nicholas, only fit for a poor beggar woman ; and she would have to be feeble indeed if she could carry no greater load. But the old tree is relieved now and looks all the better for it already. One tree the more on earth, even if the tree should have to change hands one day. Of course ! What difference would that make ? . . . Brute of a branch ! You don't want to come, don't you ? But come you shall, down with the rest of them ! . . . Yes, even if unheard of things were to happen. . . . One tree the more—but a very old one and possibly not worth all the trouble it gives.

Well, well ! It's time to go back to the house, if he wants to catch his children over their basins of bread and milk, and to make up by a joke or two for the solemnity that is rather apt to lurk in worthy Miss Barge's lessons, even when they are helped out by the schoolmaster's. They will be in good spirits, however, as Louis's three children are assisting in the attack on the mountains of bread and butter—if Laurette can still be called a child, growing as she does into more and more of a pretty girl every day.

Has the sun only this moment risen ? Or has Nicholas been too much engrossed in his work to notice its arrival ? Golden spangles are shining through the riddled ceiling of the wood. The tree-tops kindle in the cold pink light of the slanting rays. His rapid steps set the loose stones rolling down the slopes. In vain the steel serpent glitters on the end of his staff. No, tempter, though it may please you to lead

me astray, you shall feed no more on briar, nor on fern either ! I'm too hungry to think of your cravings, and my own stomach is calling out as loudly as a whole litter of pigs ! Well, quick, if you must then ; just one flying shot, just this spray of bramble, but no stopping !

II

From Willy

Dear Mummy

It's very amusing here. I have got three baby dogs. Their mummy was run over by a lorry. I give them milk.

Love from Willy

From Lise

My dear Aunt Reine

Papa has told us a wonderful story about Red Indians. They came and besieged Saint Saturnin. It was I who killed the Black Elk chief with my carbine and when Son-of-Lonely-Wolf came down the chimney, it was Laurette who drove him out of his mind by playing her sonatina 843 *times running. They took Mme Tavernier off with them because they thought her so beautiful.*

I dig my nose and my sharp chin into your cheeks till you scream.

From Jacquou

My dear Aunt Reine

Really that boy Willy is too disgusting. We found the puppies were sticky all over. He had licked them himself. He says they hadn't got a mummy and so they had to be licked. Aunt Jourdaine has promised us knives if we will go out with Grandfather because he's very sad.

Plenty of love

From Jacquou

From Marianne

Dear Mummy

I have finished Louis le Gros and sulphuric acid. I had 16 *for my correspondence composition. I verify everything Miss Barge says in the book, as I have discovered she believes in Semiramis. I talk*

English with Aunt Jourdaine. At any rate she does know grammar. She gave me a very good explanation of the " woulds " *and the* " shoulds."

Answer all my questions.

Is it absolutely necessary to like Mme de Sévigné ?

Is it absolutely necessary to call Mme Tavernier Cousin Ninette ? She wants us to but we think it's like the people in Mme de Ségur.

Do you agree with Laurette that Uncle Nicholas is like Alexander the Great and that because he's not a bit bald he's better looking than Daddy ?

Do you agree with Miss Barge that it's disgraceful to say " damn it all " and something else as well, only I don't know how to spell it. Grandfather shouted it out in the yard.

Mind and answer truthfully, and if you don't know, don't say I shall understand better when I'm older.

A thousand hugs.

FROM LAURETTE

My darling Mummy

If we hadn't come here for such a sad reason, I can't tell you how happy I should be. It is the first time I have been at Saint Saturnin at the beginning of winter. I thought I knew every bush, every plant on the place. Long ago, in the days when we used to make holes in our linings and push needles from the big fir-tree into them, so as to have them on us the whole year round, I used to get angry with Fernand when he wanted to make out that he loved any single corner of it better than I did. Now you can tell him I've left him far behind and he'll never catch me up again. It's all different and perfectly marvellous !

I have begun The Mill on the Floss *again. I do hope you'll give it me for my sixteenth birthday. It's your fault if I didn't finish the first time. You just say " It's very good " and nothing else. Uncle Nick talks to me about Stephen and Tom Tulliver. It interests me immensely now. He's always got something to say about the books he's read, so much so that one wants to read even the ones he thinks bad.*

I've made a discovery. I believe he's horribly greedy. He says I'm a savage because I eat stewed fruit with a spoon. He says one ought to use a fork because then it gets on to one's tongue sooner. Isn't it horrible ? And now of course, all the children refuse to eat it in any other way.

Your loving daughter.

From Jourdaine

Dearest Reine

She's still here. All our hints, all our innuendos have been useless. It's almost a fortnight now. Life is already falling into regular ways again. If I go to my father's room two days running at the same hour, it is an embryo habit taking shape, and my one fear is that, even without any malice on her side, Ninette may be drawn into becoming a part of this new network of custom. I try to prevent it by breaking away every day from what seemed to be taking root the day before ; but I should never have the courage to persevere in these wearisome precautions if it were not for the kind of scandalous defiance the woman's presence seems to be hurling at all Mother cared for.

I keep a watch on her. She seems rather intimidated by the tone of the household. One feels she never says a word without being prepared to take it back the next minute. The only thing to be noticed about her language and manners is that she carefully avoids anything at all jarring. I don't think she is bad so much as weak and extravagant—a victim to the need for money.

It can't be denied that she has a soothing influence on my father's most painful agitation. Louis, with his usual tendency to simplify things, writes to me, " As she seems to have the effect of calming him down, isn't it something to be thankful for ? " But it seems to me equally unpleasant and unwise to accept any services whatever from her.

I remember the astonishment of some acquaintances we once made abroad, when I tried to explain how our mutual confidence was a bond powerful enough in spite of its being hidden, to keep a family like ours united. They smiled politely at the idea of such a mixed team being held together by such gossamer threads. I treated their

scepticism in a rather superior fashion. " Yes," I said, " that's how we're made in this old world of ours." But for the last few days the recollection of their ironical looks has been worrying me. The understanding between us brothers and sisters, between our father and all of us children, seemed to us stronger than a thousand legal codes. We should have been ashamed, not only to set down in writing, but even to speak out loud, what is taken as a matter of course by all well-conditioned minds. We knew that we should always out-do each other in scrupulous behaviour and that our parents' care for us would always be greater than anything we could repay. Think of that letter of Father's which we read together on the evening of the funeral. There were sentences in it that I have copied out so as to be able to recollect them exactly. They seemed almost natural to us at the time, they were so much in the spirit of the past, but I realise now how exceptional and exquisite they were. Oh, my dear, I have to repeat them over to myself whenever the thought comes across me that, as the preacher would say, it is perhaps presumptuous of man to rely on the nobility of his impulses alone. (I beg you to admire this maxim, which to my amazement I have set down on paper! I am so pleased with it that I am feeling better already.)

But even if we were aiming imprudently high, we will try to keep on to the end. And besides, in such a matter as this, it may be allowed that even failure is honourable. Your children's delightful high spirits help to keep up our courage and patience.

We think of you constantly and affectionately.

III

A RED GLOW crawls over the carpet, climbs up the legs of the furniture, touches the under side of the chairs, licks the shining edge of the table. Like a setting sun, the fire on the hearth sheds its light over a strange undergrowth of mahogany and rosewood—twisting roots, varnished stems, all the obscure vegetation of the deserted drawing-room. Not a crackling, hurrying, brushwood fire, but a fire of great logs, slow to let the flames eat into them, slow to break up into their mighty embers. That beechwood stump, just turning into charcoal, has been smouldering since morning. The dogs, after their afternoon walk, have been sleeping peacefully just where they lay down, without even the faintest sound of their breathing being heard. The furniture, symmetrically bestowed, stands like a company of ancient servants, patiently awaiting their master's return, whether this afternoon, or to-morrow, or next winter—or whenever it may be. Infinitesimal insects gnawing at an enormous beam in the thickness of the ceiling, from time to time let fall a grain of dust, slowly marking the lapse of years like an hour-glass.

One of the setters cocks his ears ; he has heard a distant sound of chairs being moved. As a rule this produces a gentle beating of tails upon the carpet ; but to-day the dogs are motionless, listening to the footsteps approaching from the dining-room and to the voices coming nearer through the hall. As the human beings make their noisy irruption, they get up, as if resenting the light and retreat into a dark corner.

Mr. Colombe is leaning on Mme Tavernier's arm, and she apostrophises the animals from the doorway.

" Well, my beauties, come along and be patted ! "

" Flatterer ! " thinks Jourdaine, shutting the door behind

her. And as the dogs still show no sign of moving, she calls them too.

"Here, Biscot, Biscot, old dog ! Come along, Biscotine ! "

But they turn round sulkily and lie down again in their corner. A little mortified, she adds hastily :

"They're quite right. Sleep in peace, my dears ! "

And she walks quickly to the arm-chair her mother always used to sit in. The other day (is it believable ?), her cousin had been ill-advised enough to take her seat in it. Will she again permit herself to elbow Elisabeth's knitting from where it has been deliberately arranged in its accustomed place in the middle of the table ?

The embroidery-frame, with its tightly stretched canvas, illusory rampart though it may be, yet creates a semblance of solitude for Jourdaine. There at least, the weary hours are flowery with wool-work grottoes and blue roses ; the ashes of this melancholy evening will at least leave one rose behind them. . . . But the lines of stitches are waving up and down and growing misty. Does it mean she must take to spectacles ? She passes her fingers over her eyelids ; what can have touched her so much as to fill her eyes with tears ? The dogs have refused to recognise her—she is merely one of three actors, who are playing their parts with artificial voices in a silly trivial comedy. Horses notice at once the slightest sign of nervousness in their riders, and how would it be possible for these two soft-eyed creatures, so easily disconcerted by a harsh word or a note of ridicule, not to feel bewildered in the depressing atmosphere of all this sham cordiality ? So then, their infallible instinct cannot now detect any difference between her, Jourdaine, and this sophisticated stranger ! And what right has she to expect any other treatment, taken up as she is with all this miserable spying ? But how can one keep one's eye on an adversary, if one doesn't follow him on to his own ground, if one loses contact, as they say in their military jargon ? There was a letter from the bank quite three days ago. All right then ! we're shutting our eyes. You've got what you

wanted. Spare us all these airs and graces which have served their turn. Go back now to your own way of life.

Why bend over the old man's chair with such hypocritical veneration ? What is the silly creature saying ? Not so silly perhaps. (I can still hear old Prince Alexander declaring that the mistake always made by people with brains was to think their adversaries have too few.) After all, it can't be easy for her, coming from where she does, to hit upon the tone required here. She's going into raptures now over the glorious autumn colouring of the leaves. " An apotheosis ! " Poor rash woman, you've put your foot into it now, and no mistake. . . . I thought as much. The retort comes instantaneously.

" Glorious ? Did you say glorious ? That's the way town people talk. You've got all that twaddle from the poets, chatterers, absolutely devoid of imagination. You should say ' terrible colouring, appalling pallor.' Do you talk of apotheosis when you see the green patches of putrefaction, or the violet streaks of gangrene ? (Yes, yes, it's the same thing !) Why don't the poets, I wonder, celebrate those entrancing tints too ? "

And before the lady, completely dumbfounded, can stammer out a single word in reply, he begins again :

" Have you never asked yourself what were the feelings of primitive man when he saw nature gradually lose her colours and turn pale, struck apparently with the same terror as his own at the approach of winter—the season of suffering and lack of food ? That is what the poets would understand, if they were capable of real imagination."

Through the canvas, the needle dives and comes up again more swiftly than before. " Oh, dear, how he's bullying her ! " It makes Jourdaine feel ready to be generous. She intervenes.

" As women have no imagination either, you must let Ninette and me be poets too and enjoy the colour of the falling leaves."

And now it is against her that the flood of eloquence is turned.

" You a poet ! You, one of the most reasonable creatures on the face of the earth ! If one of us here is a poet, it is I, in the true sense of the word, though I have never written a line with Apollos and Nymphs in it. For I can see into the inside of things. I understand their language. I suffer with them. That is what is wanting in all you three children. You don't understand suffering."

Jourdaine starts, but the old man throws back his head, and tossing it two or three times, half tragically, half mockingly :

" Yes, yes," he says, " that's how you're made ! "

This is too good an opportunity to return her cousin's politeness for Mme Tavernier to resist, and she comes to her help with a smiling diversion. Jourdaine hardly takes in what she is saying, so disconcerted is she by her father's outburst. But Mr. Colombe continues in the same declamatory style he has seemed to take such a strange pleasure in for these last few days.

" It's as if we were dancing a kind of ballet," thinks Jourdaine. " Thank Heaven, there's no one to see us."

The old man is now talking of his own father ; he begins one anecdote after another and then suddenly breaks off, as if his mind was continually being switched into directions he has no wish to follow.

" What did I want to say ? What were we talking about just now ? "

" About leaves," says Mme Tavernier.

" No, no, not leaves."

" And poets."

" No, not poets either."

Then all at once, " We were speaking of suffering," he says, " . . . of the comprehension of the suffering of others. My father was an immortal example of that. Yes, yes, I'm not afraid of words. Do you suppose I am afraid ? You know how his wife died, burnt alive at the age of thirty, through one of those absurd crinolines, for women must always . . . but no matter. He was only thirty-six years old, and my

grandmother, seeing him left alone with two little boys (I had a younger brother who died of diphtheria), my grandmother did all she could to get him to marry again. He never even let her finish her sentence. Mind you, he was an attractive man, with a most affectionate disposition. He had all the outward appearance of good spirits and even allowed himself considerable freedom of speech. For instance, one day . . . but it was really nothing but a mask for the feelings of his heart . . . yes, his large heart. So that in the most dissolute of all periods, I mean at the end of the second Empire . . . have you read those Memoirs . . . I've forgotten the name of the author . . . Jourdaine, you know. . . ."

His daughter hastily begins repeating names. By all means let us talk of Païva or the Duc de Morny, so long as grandfather's private life is left in peace.

"It's not that at all," says William Colombe. "There now, you've made me lose my thread. . . . I was saying . . . Yes, my father. . . . Well, notwithstanding all the advances that were made him (and he was a handsome man to whom women were by no means indifferent), he never could be got to give up the one thought that possessed his soul. Why? You will say, 'Because of his principles.' Nothing of the kind. Now listen to what I say. Because of his inability to forget. Because although years and years went by, his wife was as much present in his thoughts as she had been the evening she left him, on this very spot, to go up to her doom. And in his last illness at seventy years of age, do you know what it was he murmured into my ear when I bent over him to ask if he was in pain? Not 'my head aches' or 'every breath I take is torture.' What he whispered, as if he was able at last to reveal the secret of his whole life, was this: 'I can still hear her screams. . . .'"

Jourdaine doesn't dare look up from her work. Why is he telling them all this? Why, in this woman's presence? But before she can overcome her discomfort sufficiently to think of anything to say, a faint convulsive sound makes her raise

her head. The old man is crying. She is already getting up to go to him ; but Mr. Colombe, instead of drying his tears, has turned towards Mme Tavernier and seems to be calling on her to take notice of them. He has a strange smile, to which his daughter finds it hard to give a name, so full is it of exaltation and of something painfully ostentatious and complacent.

She finds herself suddenly blushing, so unjust, so cruel do the words seem that have sprung to her mind :

" He's showing off—spreading his tail—like a peacock ! "

IV

"SHE's going! The female's going!"

The rumour spreads in a few moments from the kitchen to the linen-room, the stables, the farm.

"Richard's had orders to drive her to the station. She thinks after all it's time to get a clean chemise. . . . Yes, Babet; she's going, the bitch. You won't need to spit into her water-jug now every morning!"

Mlle Cheu runs up to Jourdaine's room.

"So she's really going, Madame!"

"She's going?"

The housekeeper tells the tale as far as she knows it.

"You astonish me, Jenny. There was no word of such a thing last night. Can she have had any letters?"

Mlle Cheu proposes to go down and find out.

"No, no, Jenny, what does it matter? You see it's turning out all right. You were beginning to frighten me with your foolish notions."

There is a tap at the door. Here comes the governess, Miss Barge, with the news.

"Ah! You know about it already?"

The excitement with which the two old maidens are bubbling prevents her from giving way herself to any absurd agitation. They are touching too in their zealous protection of the ant-heap, these poor, barren, hard-driven workers; yes, just like two lean-ribbed, working ants, flinging themselves frantically on the enemy who has strayed into their city.

"If she's really going, get out of my room quickly, for she's bound to come and tell me herself."

And sure enough, in another quarter of an hour Mme Tavernier appears.

Then come excuses for the indiscretion of so much too long a stay; thanks for a reception so much more cordial

than what she had a right to expect, than what she deserved after an intrusion so unwarranted.

"From the very first moment, Jourdaine, I felt I ought to have refused. But as time went on I felt it still more. Of course I knew what you were like, you and your people; but I had only seen you away from home. Here, in your sanctuary . . . for it really is your family's holy place . . . here, everything from the outside seems to make a stain, and one feels almost sacrilegious. . . ."

If she has really realised it, thinks Jourdaine, let her go in peace. Perhaps, after all, she's not lying, although every word she says sounds insincere; there exist unfortunate creatures who can only express their most genuine emotions in tones that ring false.

"And then, Jourdaine, I want to tell you . . . your dear mother. . . ."

Perceiving a little shadow come over her cousin's face, she hesitates:

"I beg your pardon, I shouldn't have alluded to your loss. . . ."

But with some courage, she conquers her embarrassment and goes on:

"There was a time when I didn't recognise the fineness of her character, but now . . . I understand her better. I felt I had to tell you so."

If this is a piece of diplomacy, it is not wanting in skill. Jourdaine is disarmed and for the first time has an impulse of cordiality:

"I'm very glad, my dear Ninette, very glad indeed."

She rises as though to go up to Mme Tavernier, and then stops, rather awkwardly, half-way. She really cannot kiss this woman for having realised that Saint Saturnin is not the same thing as the house of her former lover, the stock-jobber, and for having at last made up her mind to go. Oh, anything to hear that voice no more! How light the burden will seem when it is reduced to just the unavoidable anxieties, the anxieties sent us by fate, which we put up with as

with the infirmities of our own bodies ! It was this final straw that was making the whole weight intolerable. What is happening in London ? If one could only escape for a day or two and make sure that things are going smoothly at home for a man who doesn't like worries. He must often have had to fret and fume against his absent wife ; all the fault of this tiresome woman ; and God knows what a pile of unpaid bills will have accumulated again !

" So, Ninette, you made up your mind this very morning ? "

" Oh, that's to say . . . I have been wanting to leave for a long time past. It's your father . . . you know how despotic he is."

" And you've ended by persuading him ? "

Mme Tavernier's answer comes rather too hastily :

" I'm afraid he'll give you a great deal of trouble one day."

Is she inviting questions ? Is this a fleeting opportunity that may never recur again ?

" Yes, a great deal of trouble," repeats Mme Tavernier with a rather odd emphasis.

But Jourdaine has already drawn back. They've not reached the confidential stage yet, and besides what could one hope to find out from a source so suspect ?

No sooner is her cousin through the door, than she tells herself she was wrong, that even in the most important affairs of this world the reports of shady agents have to be made use of. It can't be helped now, however. It's too late. She hurries out to find Nicholas.

The sound of hammering tells her he is in one of the outbuildings, in a small room which he has turned into a workshop.

When she comes in, she finds him heating a piece of iron on a small forge. He shouts to her without stopping the bellows :

" It's no good your trying to tell me the news ! You've

got in third ! What public rejoicing ! We shall have to offer glasses of wine all round ! It will end in one's being sorry for the poor wretch ! "

With a pair of tongs, he draws out from the coals the iron hinge he is preparing to straighten, and lays it red-hot on the anvil.

" That oaf Richard managed to knock his cart against the Pré-Gosset gate and has wrenched its hinges . . . but it won't take me long, and as we're safe from trouble now up at the house, I shall take my departure by the three o'clock train. You don't mind, do you ? I shall be back again the day after to-morrow."

Jourdaine watches the dull, short-lived sparks being driven out of the reddened iron by the strokes of the hammer. Escape ! So *his* first idea too is to escape, and without even troubling to put forward a decent excuse for absenting himself. And now in his masculine impudence he has actually got in first, so that she dare not mention what she herself is planning, for fear her own impatience should be set on the same base level as his.

" Did you see her ? " he asks.

She describes the visit in a word or two.

" Well, for my part," says he, beginning to blow the bellows again, " it was Father I met. Mind you, I'd heard nothing so far, so I wasn't paying much attention. He was certainly rather cross, but not exactly in a rage—looking a little—what shall I say ? Yes, hang-dog—as if he'd just done something silly."

She listens to him absent-mindedly without attempting to put two and two together. This man in his blue overalls, his forehead wet with sweat, toiling like a navvy—God alone knows with what perfunctory and animal satisfactions he contents himself ! Isn't it really rather base to be so little exacting, to be disturbed by no loftier desires ? With what a mocking smile would Amédée de Sinnis hear of the escapades of Nick the blacksmith ! Let him be off after his scanty pleasures, poor boy !

She catches sight of the black hand holding the hammer; on its palm is a dark smear which has spread on to the handle of his tool.

"Why, Nick, you're bleeding!"

"Oh, it's nothing; only a little splinter of iron."

"Let me get it out for you."

"I haven't got time, and my hands are too dirty."

He ends by giving in, however, and she takes the muscular and skilful hand between both her own.

"Am I hurting you?"

"All right, only hurry up."

The hand is warm. "A hand with no cruelty in it," thinks Jourdaine, "a hand to take firm hold of what it covets." The hand lets itself be probed without resistance, apparently indifferent to the lacerating splinter. "Poor Nick," her thoughts continue, "what a hard life he has!" The hand is black with coal dust and hardened by the use of tools, yet the skin on the back of it is smooth and fine. A substantial and yet caressing hand. Jourdaine cannot help being moved by this simple and almost childish contact. "He is a worker, and what right has anyone to deny him the little he asks for? While as for me, a useless, faded wife, what alms am I begging for in the guise of a devoted friend? To what hope am I clinging, without dignity, without even the excuse of the smallest illusion? . . ."

In a drop of bright red blood, the fine metal point is beginning to come through. Jourdaine is on the point of saying, "If one of us had died a fortnight ago, Mother's thoughts would never have left Saint Saturnin. And all *we* manage to do is to conceal our impatience. . . ."

But no; let's say nothing. One always talks too much.

V

GREY poplars grow alongside the brook. Their trunks are of silver and pewter, their airy grace lovely to behold. Not a leaf is left on them and the shape of every branch, its slightest fork, its slenderest twigs are visible. The beauty of one single bough alone, with its tracery and arabesques, would be enough in itself to fill the heart with joy. And every tree has so many boughs ! And from one end to the other of the long meadow, there are so many trees ! Who will look at them—not one by one—for the fifty eyes of Argus himself would not suffice—but at least with a look of gratitude for so much loveliness ?

The old man comes hobbling down the path leading from the house. Mlle Cheu follows him carrying a plaid. One day his stick had slipped on a stone and he had fallen ; he would have been unable to get to his feet again, without the help of a passer-by, and since this happened he has been afraid to go out alone. But in the morning, Jourdaine has letters to write and the children are at their lessons. He has had to fall back on the old housekeeper, scraggy old crow ! This is the kind of company he is reduced to ! The road goes downhill through a piece of ground overhung with trees and always damp and chilly. Here Mr. Colombe comes to a standstill and begins to discourse about the condensation of moisture on the trees. Mlle Cheu, whose wrap is of the thinnest, timidly reminds him it is rash to linger in such a cold spot. He evidently hears what she says, for he pulls up the collar of his thick coat, but without moving on.

" Observe now," he begins.

His breath makes a slight mist as he puffs it out and in, vigorously at first and then more gently.

" You see the way in which the vapour is dissipated. But now, if I interpose some object . . ."

He passes his stick and then his hand through the little cloud of breath.

" Now, feel my fingers."

Her hands are hidden in her sleeves. She takes out one of them.

" Take your glove off."

She obeys, and with a shivering finger touches the hand held out to her.

" Don't be alarmed. One would think you were afraid of touching a man's finger."

She hastily puts on her glove again and returns her hands to their shelter.

" If you had the most elementary knowledge of the first principles of physics . . ."

But now, feeling chilly himself, he looks Mlle Cheu up and down, and then, " You seem to be cold," he remarks. " We must take a smart walk."

And no sooner do they reach the meadow where the path becomes level again, than he begins to increase his speed. He has left off discoursing, all his attention being focused on getting one foot in front of the other as fast as he can. With a hand laid flat on the small of his back, he finds it impossible to take longer steps, but he quickens his pace till it becomes a kind of trot. Every time he gets three or four yards ahead of Mlle Cheu, he murmurs, though without stopping, something she cannot hear properly, so that she is forced into skipping over the ground too in order to catch him up.

" One's blood goes down into one's legs, if one walks slowly . . . you're not listening . . ." and he scurries on faster than ever—" whereas a good brisk walk keeps the circulation moving."

By the time they reach the end of the meadow he is quite out of breath, but she is still more so. He pauses to give himself time to recover and says :

"You never look at anything."

She turns her head nervously in every direction.

"There's no need to look at the horizon. Look at this tree-stump, which is infinitely more interesting."

Being very short-sighted, she puts on her eye-glasses.

"Now what do you notice about it? Well, that the centre of the tree has disappeared. The reason of that is that it was cut in the black bottom fashion. You think that sounds indecent? All the same, it's a good old-fashioned expression. Really, Mlle Cheu, at your age, you shouldn't be so easily shocked. You must speak to Mr. Nicholas about it. It was from him I got the word. His wood-cutters use it. Black bottom. Yes, just so."

He feels ready now to make a fresh start, and the race begins anew in the opposite direction. The eye-glasses drop; Mlle Cheu, hampered by the heavy plaid, fails to keep up. But, though the old man gets no more answers, he tries to walk still faster and only stops when the path begins to go uphill again. Just at this moment Jourdaine turns into it.

"I was wondering what had become of you," she says.

He jerks his head towards the housekeeper.

"Poor woman, completely done up! Your mother worked her very hard. She's worn out."

"Well, will you come on a few steps with me? We ought to take advantage of this splendid sunshine."

The old man hesitates:

"Pooh! . . ."

His eyes suddenly soften, as if he had only just become aware that they were resting on his favourite child.

"You mean this pale winter sunshine. . . ."

It is long since she has seen such a calm, quiet expression on his face.

"Pale sunshine, maybe," she says, "but still it warms one."

Mr. Colombe smiles pleasantly.

"But I don't need warming, my dear."

And then, going close up to her, he adds in a lower voice :

" Winter only freezes people who have finished with life and have no plans to look forward to. But I have always kept my eyes fixed on the future."

Mlle Cheu now comes up to them and the old man's thoughts at once take another direction.

" No, I'd rather go in. But you go on with your walk. Yes, yes, since you want to get warm. Mlle Cheu will give me her arm. Go on, my dear, please. Come along, Mademoiselle."

He takes his victim's arm and begins climbing the hill. He leans all his weight on her, without using his stick; there is no need of it now. He leans his whole weight—she's really a sturdy old girl still !

Earth and rusty grass, stalks and tree-trunks, ashes and mother-o'-pearl ! And the withered reeds twisting their frail caduceus wands of ivory. . . . Jourdaine follows the stream, paying no attention to anything about her. " Plans . . . the future . . . He's looking forward to the future. . . ."

At last, however, her eyes fall on a willow, burdened with a heavy mass of ivy. " Ivy," she says to herself, " still in flower. Ivy flowers all through the winter." She is touched by the sight of the little colourless, acrid-smelling umbels.

And then she goes on to think, " There are flowers all the year round on the gorse too." And the idea of the delicately scented flowers, so well—too well—protected by their prickly armour, touches her too. Her thoughts stray absent-mindedly into the past : " When other little girls of my age were making pets of doves or white mice, I was bringing up a family of hedgehogs in a box . . . the mother and five little ones . . . like a bunch of chestnuts . . . they left a slight smell of musk in one's hand. A funny little girl that, with the hedgehogs ! not attractive, but with more spunk perhaps than the goody-goody little girls with the doves ! "

She stops at the end of the meadow. "Nearly twelve o'clock!" She must take the short-cut home. They may have put the bull into the paddock. But she's not going to be afraid of a bull that's only eighteen months old. She must just keep close to the hedge.

Nearly twelve; enough lessons for the morning! Laurette thinks she may really go off for half an hour. Besides, as Uncle Nick is away, it won't matter being five minutes after the bell. Laurette sniffs the cold dry air. She has caught a glimpse of people in the garden paths and hurries off in the direction of the stream, thinking that no one ever goes that way. Laurette has discovered the charm of solitude. She flies to it greedily whenever she gets a chance, as once she used to run to the sideboard in the dining-room, where the dessert was kept: "Quick, a few raisins or a biscuit, before anyone comes." She walks fast because the lonely paths still fill her with a delicious fear; but her eyes like the rest of her, are eager for pleasure. She might perhaps notice the lovely poplars and their silvery bark, if she did not know that bare branches are an image of desolation:

The wood had lost its mystery,
The nightingale was mute.

But the poem hasn't foreseen the suns of mistletoe with which the trees are starred. She stops short in surprise at their sombre glory. They are to be seen in nearly every tree-top, grouped like constellations, green stars in a sky of pearl, capricious Cassiopeias and Pleiades, magnificently shining.

Laurette cannot name the stars, but her heart beats and she suddenly realises she is standing still. Off she runs again without knowing exactly why . . . for fear she should be accused of dawdling, or to make up for lost time. It's true that mistletoe is a noxious parasite. Uncle Nick called her a little wretch because one day she talked of magnificent

thistles. " Those vermin ! To begin with, there are none on the place. Where did you see them ? " He would say there's no mistletoe either. Perhaps, after all it *is* ugly. She can't tell now ; and off she runs again as hard as ever she can. Goodness, there's the bell !

VI

"Now, Laurette, stop crying and tell me what happened."

"I beg of you, Uncle Nick. Let me go home. There's still a train this evening."

"First of all, tell me all about it. Come and sit on the sofa beside me."

"But do order the car. I can easily travel by myself."

"I must first know what happened. Come, my child, you're quite safe here. The coachman's told me already that Grandfather took you to Variville. But what happened there? Come now, wipe your eyes. You've lost your handkerchief, of course! Here, take mine. Don't jump like that. No one ever comes into my study. To begin with, what was the idea of going to Variville? He doesn't set foot there once a year."

"Promise me, Uncle Nick, that I shall never be forced to go out with him again."

"I promise, my child. Your aunt Jourdaine will see to it. She's been summoned back to London on important business; otherwise, she would never have left us in the lurch, even for a few days. And besides your grandfather has agreed now to have a lady companion. So there's nothing to be afraid of."

"Not anywhere with him! Not even in the garden! Not even round the house!"

"No, no. Then did he ask you to go to Variville?"

"No, to go into the woods."

"And didn't you go?"

"Yes, I did at first. Towards the heron pond."

"And then what happened?"

"He said, 'We'll go and listen to the noises the beasts make. I can understand everything they say!' But he

wouldn't go by the road. He declared the car would frighten them and that we must take one of the little paths into the wood. He kept saying, ' Don't make such a noise. We must go on further.' He never thought we'd gone far enough, and as there was hardly any path, I was horribly afraid he might fall down. He kept holding up one finger the way one does to small children, and saying, ' Can't you hear ? Can't you hear ? ' I assure you, Uncle Nick, he's going out of his mind."

" And so then ? "

" So then, I refused to go on. But he got cross. He said I was a silly, nervous little girl, and that I should never understand the wonderful works of nature, and that I had made him waste his time."

" But eventually he went back again ? "

" Well, eventually he changed his mind. He explained. . . . I assure you, Uncle Nick, I'd rather go back to Paris. . . . How can you expect me to remember all he said ? "

" It doesn't matter. Did you go back to the car ? "

" Oh, yes, now I remember. He said that never in his life had he passed a day without working at something useful, and as he hadn't been able to teach me anything, well, he would work for the country."

" And there and then had himself driven to the café ? "

" No, first of all he said to Richard, ' We're going to Variville.' Richard was grumbling because you had ordered him to cart a load of dung for the garden, and it was already getting dark. But when we were in the high street, Grandfather looked about and then he said, ' We'll go to Lucas's, over there, where the light is.' Naturally, I didn't know what kind of place it was."

" And did you go into the dirty hole ? "

" Oh, Uncle Nick, when I saw what a pig-sty it was ! I didn't even think it was a café."

" It's where I take my shooting club, but I admit it's revolting."

" At first, I could hardly see anything because of the

smoke. It was full of workmen sitting close together at two long tables. I said, ' Please, please tell me why you've come here ? ' But he had me by the elbow and of course I didn't want to make a ridiculous scene. . . . I hoped we might at least be able to disappear in a corner ; but as soon as he came in, he shouted out, ' My respects to all here ! ' Some of them said, ' Good evening, Mr. Colombe,' and some of them didn't know who he was. Nobody spoke and they wondered what we wanted. But he made a sign that he wished to sit down and the people squeezed up and made room for us, right under the paraffin lamp ! "

" My poor Laurette ! "

" So that I was squeezed like a sardine between Grandfather and a great big man in shirt sleeves . . . oh no, don't laugh ! "

" I don't want to laugh when I see you looking so miserable."

" Yes, you were laughing . . . and now I don't know where I'd got to."

" Now, Laurette, my dear, don't begin crying again. And did you stay there long ? "

" To start with, he had glasses of brandy served round to everybody. They put one in front of me. I didn't want it ; but he kept saying, ' Yes, yes. She's my granddaughter ; she's plenty of pluck. Just a taste now ! ' I didn't want to behave like a silly. I didn't know what they were going to give me. Two or three who were quite drunk already, were calling out, ' Bravo, bravo, little Miss ! ' So then I swallowed some of it. I thought I was going to fall off my chair and that they'd certainly given me rat-poison."

" You're not accustomed to their cider brandy."

" It surely can't have been that ; there must have been poison in the bottle. Yes, be quiet, I mean it. And you don't know the worst of it. I can't even remember everything that happened. It's too abominable."

" And Grandfather ? "

" If he'd only been content with talking nicely to them as

he did to start with. ' We're neighbours, we ought to know each other and discuss things together.' But all of a sudden, he stood up and began haranguing and gesticulating as if he was on a platform ! As for me, I was in a cloud, but all the same I could see the people were listening, and they seemed struck with astonishment. In fact, at first, I think they were quite impressed. But after a bit, I heard them laughing. Grandfather was being witty over politics, and they were exploding. And Grandfather went on waving his arms about more violently than ever. And at last they kept laughing the whole time. I felt inclined to hide under the table. But you don't seem to see that it was at him they were laughing. It was like a Punch and Judy show."

" I can imagine it only too well. . . ."

" But wait a minute, that's not all. The worst is that someone ordered another round of brandy—in coffee. Nothing in the world would have induced me to touch it. But the big man sitting next me was completely fuddled. He insisted on my drinking out of his cup. He put it to my mouth and put his great paw on my back. I must say the others tried to stop him directly. But I was so frightened that I said as loud as I could, ' Grandfather, I'm going to see if the car is there.' "

" That was quite the right thing to do."

" But oh, when I tried to stand up . . . That's why I say it was poison. My legs felt like cotton wool. I was struggling to stand up, like a goose trying to fly. . . . Don't begin laughing again ! "

" I don't suppose anyone noticed. . . ."

" I expect all the old gossips in Variville are splitting their sides this evening ! And the big man had to give me a helping hand ! And then I had to hold on to the door ! And I didn't see the pavement in the dark and rolled on the ground like a drunken woman ! "

" So that's how your stocking got torn, my poor child ! Don't begin trembling again."

" Then you will let me go ? "

" No, no ; don't let's make too much of this stupid business."

" I beseech you ! "

" The day after to-morrow it's Sunday and your Father has promised to come down for a shoot. I'm afraid he'll be only too furious."

" But if Grandfather is really going mad ? "

" Not quite mad. . . . A little mad . . . like many old men . . . and they are the most difficult to look after. We shall all have to help as much as we can. . . . You too, Laurette dear. . . . It's difficult, very difficult. . . . But we shall manage somehow."

VII

"I SHALL wait outside here" thinks Louis, "on the gravel path, till Father comes down for his walk. An explanation in his room might tend to become rather solemn. Just a few straight words and then we'll talk of something else. Most fortunately Nick has kept quiet and left me to deal with my own concerns. In my first feeling of annoyance I might easily have gone too far myself. After all, it's a very small affair; simply tiresome. Laurette made tipsy and pawed by a drunkard. Don't let's be dramatic. The young husband who will cuddle her one day with my own consent, will be far more irritating. A very salutary little lesson in life. Thank God Reine is away! The poor old man can't be very proud of his prank! No need to humiliate him more than's necessary.

"On the other hand there's one comfort—we're fixed with a fact. A harmless fact, but a positive one. Very different from impressions, Jourdaine and Nicholas can't keep their heads. Let's be precise, if you please. Bring your phantoms out into the light of day and let's have a good look at them. But no, they are always occupied with clouds of mist and trying to discover terrifying shapes in them. Exactly so, Jourdaine, my girl; and yet nothing is ever so wonderful or so terrible as one imagines. . . . Romantics after their fashion; that's to say they pass things by without looking at them; all they care for in an event is the little froth that can be made round about it. . . . It wouldn't matter so much if they didn't think it helped them to a 'higher reality.' No, no, my dear friends, it's nothing but a gas-bag reality, a watery, sugary make-believe. Just what I personally think flat and empty.

"If Father doesn't come down, I shall have to go up to his room after all. Ten o'clock already and half my precious

morning gone to the dogs. I'll take the opportunity at the same time of talking about Saint Saturnin, as I see I shall have to take a hand in that business too. It's all very pretty to dance round circumstances and decorate them with garlands of fine phrases, but it's not the way to control them. There's no ambition in Nick. . . . Invisible luxuries as he says ; the Chinaman's robe, made of sack-cloth but lined with the finest silk. Well, I grant you. Patiently niggling over sorts of finicky masterpieces ; getting a full-rigged schooner inside a bottle ! Wasted powers—small returns—democratic affectation. However, if it makes him happy . . .

" Still, having chosen a narrow field of action, one should at any rate make oneself master of it ; and Saint Saturnin so far only belongs to him in theory. There was no reason for hurry ; agreed ! But he might have found a hundred opportunities. . . . Disinterestedness ; yes, only too much of it ! For God's sake, let's have a little less delicacy, if it has to be paid for in the end by ill-feeling ! He saw more plainly than we did all the inconveniences of the present situation ; well then, devil take it all, he was surely old enough. . . . ' Things will settle themselves.' Nothing of the kind ! They never settle themselves ; they have to *be* settled.

" Queer kind of indolence. . . . This great edifice on which mankind is at work . . . the scaffolding on which the world rests. . . . How strange not to understand that if it doesn't come crashing down under its own immense dead weight, if it still goes on growing, it's only thanks to the few strong wills that support the whole structure ! How strange not to wish to be one of them, if one has any generous feeling at all ! And it's not that he's without it, the silly ass, but he's satisfied with short rations, a stunted life, and an absurdly narrow margin of success. Small gains and small hopes. Small efforts. Never any resolute exertion, no straining of every nerve. Courage, my lad, stick to it ! One more turn of the screw, one more quarter turn, and it will mean some visible change on this planet of ours. Yes, if I can manage to

do the English out of that big order for rails, the prosperity of nations will even to this small extent, be taking a new direction.

"All the same, my father is quite capable of not coming down at all. Perhaps he's hoping to be forgotten. Well then, up I go. . . . So long as he doesn't become tearful . . . I wish I hadn't stuffed down all that brown bread with my coffee this morning. . . ."

Louis might indeed have had a long time to wait, for he finds his father comfortably installed over a roaring fire.

"It's nice and warm in your room."

"Ah, my boy, it's you. I'm glad to see you. Quite right to come down now and then. Is your family well? When do you go back?"

"This evening. And as I haven't much time . . ."

"I suppose you'll be shooting the home woods? They tell me the roes have been gnawing the bark of all the young fir-trees. You must shoot us one of the criminals."

"So I will, this afternoon. But this morning . . ."

"I used to be very fond of shooting, but I was never able to get enough of it. Three or four times a winter only. There were no week-ends then, no easy ways of getting about. So that when I set out at seven in the evening . . ."

Louis has not been into the room since his mother's death. There has been nothing altered in it. The two heavy mahogany bedsteads standing side by side in all their conjugal majesty, the tuppeny-ha'penny crockery, so dear to Elisabeth's heart, the rubbishy ornaments over which, in their daily dustings and polishings, the servant-maids must have consumed hours amounting to years. . . . He watches for the first opening in his father's remarks. . . .

"You were fond of shooting," he says, "because just like me, you love the country, but not so much the country folk. You and I, who are accustomed to the industrial workman . . ."

However roundabout the approach, the old man scents it and shies off.

"Talking of that," he breaks in, "have you heard what happened to the parish-priest of Messicourt?"

"These rustics puzzle us," continues Louis, "and neither you nor I know how to deal with them. When we think we've caught them in a moment of genuine sincerity . . ."

William Colombe makes an attempt to get up.

"Give me my stick," he says.

But Louis remains where he is with his back against one of the beds.

"If they ever do appear to be opening their hearts to one, it's a sure sign they have some hidden purpose. And that's why there's always . . ."

By dint of pressing on the arms of his chair, his father has half succeeded in rising.

"Can't you help me a little?" he says.

No; Louis wishes to retain his post of vantage.

"That's why there will always be misunderstandings between them and us. You must admit . . ."

But William Colombe has managed somehow to get to his feet.

"You leave me in front of this roasting fire," he says, twisting round and looking towards the door. A shoot, thinks Louis, watching him . . . yes, one of those drives in which the game is herded up against the palings and tries desperately to escape. On such occasions, the sportsman doesn't feel very proud of his job. Poor old man, trying to make a way for himself between his arm-chair and the table. . . .

"You have never taken any trouble to make yourself popular in the constituency, and it's rather late to begin now."

"Stop, stop! . . . Why, what makes you think . . . ?"

"It would be the only plausible explanation of your expedition the other day. At any rate, you'll admit it was very improper to mix Laurette up with it."

"Laurette! . . . Laurette!" stammers the old man, turning very red.

Still, if they fly at his throat like this, he means to stand up to them.

"Did she hear anything objectionable? And what of it? I didn't know you were such an admirer of convent education. I apologise, my dear chap, I apologise."

Louis is nettled.

"It wasn't so much for herself she felt ashamed as for you, for the painful position you had got yourself into."

"I am a better judge of that," his father replies, "than a little whippersnapper of a girl."

He seems afraid of getting the worst of the duel, however, and continues trying to make his way to the door.

"I should never have said a word about the business," Louis goes on, "if it weren't in contradiction with your whole life. Do you mean to become a political agitator, and start flattering the labourers in their pot-houses? But on whose behalf? Our deputies are quite popular enough to stand on their own legs."

But the old man is not to be caught.

"Experience alone can teach a man what he is capable of," he exclaims.

And then he lets himself go.

"Let me tell you that in our family we come to maturity slowly. "We're not flashy fireworks. Roman candles that make fools gape, and fizzle out the next minute. It takes years to show what we are worth. . . ."

And he continues with increasing animation:

"We still keep growing when others would be beginning to get fossilised. You may think yourself now at the height of your powers. But you are worth more than that; you can take it from me. There was a time when I, like you, underrated the resources latent in our blood. I estimated my own strength too modestly. I have had to wait until reaching my present age before doing justice to the inherited capacity of our race and understanding its true greatness!"

And this time, far from retreating, William Colombe, with flashing eyes, walks back to the centre of the room. Louis,

when he feels himself on solid ground, is a skilful enough negotiator, but he is not very sure of his footing here. He determines not to rush things.

"I hope very much," he says, "I shall experience this prolonged crescendo myself; it's a prospect that'll console me for a great many small disappointments. But although the mind may still continue capable of growth, the body must surely obey the common law. . . ."

"I never was better in my life."

"When you retired from business . . ."

Old Colombe's stick raps on the carpet.

"Well, I've been resting ever since. Besides, my dear boy, if I did retire prematurely, it was principally to make room for you. I'm afraid you have a short memory."

However unfortunate a turn the conversation may have taken, Louis would despise himself if he threw up his hand now, and he summons to his help all the powers of diplomacy he is master of.

"My memory is so good," he answers, "that it makes me uncomfortable to think of all you've done for me in especial. Not that Nick has ever shown any sign of being offended. . . ."

"By what, pray?"

"By such obvious unfairness. I'm in a position that might almost be called brilliant. . . ."

"Nick is perfectly contented with things as they are," he says.

"But I am not; and for my own peace of mind, I should like to have the question of Saint Saturnin definitely settled."

Delighted with the stratagem he has hit on—worthy, he thinks, of Amédée de Sinnis at his best—Louis determines to follow it up, regardless of his father's signs of impatience.

"Nick has not only had all the trouble of running the estate for the last twenty years, but the cattle and farm implements are his. He has been continuously improving

the place all this while, so that in common justice the land belongs to him too. . . ."

"What's the use of dragging in lawyers?" groans the old man.

"To put things in order, and to get me out of an extremely false position."

"But not to-day, my boy. . . . There's plenty of time! . . ."

"One word to our friend Ramelle, and it can all be settled in a quarter of an hour."

There now! He's making for the door again. No, he stops and exclaims bitterly:

"A man of my age can't be left to wander about without a roof over his head!"

"You can't be serious," says Louis. "If you keep the house for yourself, and the garden and all the outbuildings. . . ."

His father pretends not to hear.

". . . can't be expected to beg for hospitality!"

And he puts on the appearance already of a poor bent old man, driven bare-headed from his home into a snowstorm.

"The sad fact is," he adds, "that none of you trust my word any longer!"

In vain Louis attempts a half-joking protest, it's his father's turn now to feel he has the best of the argument, and he continues to make play with it.

"You think it's as well to take precautions. Against what? . . . Against the injustices I may commit! . . . And it's you who tells me so! . . . It's you, my eldest son, who wound me in this way, and actually smile over it!"

The deliberate exaggeration of his indignation is too obvious for Louis to be much moved by it.

"Oh come, come, my dear Father, you're pretending not to understand."

But old Colombe is not going to abandon so promising a theme.

" You think I'm done for. That's what it is. . . . A rambling old man in his second childhood ! "

It is obviously better to bring the conversation to a close, thinks Louis.

" Well, I've made my suggestion. You must think it over."

" To feel strong is to be strong," cries his father vehemently. " I'm no pleasure-seeker, understand that ! I'm a worker, toiling in the sweat of his brow ! "

And with his two trembling arms upraised, " I shall die fighting," he cries. " In the thick of the fray ! I shall die on my feet ! "

" You'll find it a very uncomfortable position," remarks Louis coldly ; and pursuing his fleeting advantage, he adds hastily :

" But as fortunately you're not running any danger at present, I'll go and see the children. Good-bye till this afternoon."

The afternoon finds Louis still in a bad temper.

" If those idiots haven't let the beast get away, out towards Jude's Heath ! No chance of getting a single shot. Well, what can you expect when they keep a kind of woodcutter as gamekeeper. Another of Nick's little notions. The simple life ! The simple life ! Run along to the heath then as fast as you please. It's not the least use sounding that horn. I can hear the dogs perfectly well. Oh, go to the devil, all of you ! I shall take up my abode at the bottom of this hollow ; the leaves look quite dry. I shall unload my gun too. You can amuse yourselves looking for me as long as you like.

" But what want of foresight, to let an indefinite situation of this kind perpetuate itself for ever. An ingenious fellow is dear old Nick ; but with no outlook ; the notions of a foreman. Otherwise how could he carry on such a mouldy, slug-like existence without its being the death of him ? Content to die without ever having tried anything else ! ' Lord,

judge me by my works—by these straight rows of beetroots and these carefully cleared drains!'

"And now, here he is up against an old man who's losing his wits, and who's getting more and more despotic every day and less and less able to control his likes and dislikes. What's coming out now is what has been hatching for the last twenty years. That was the time to have earned consideration and acquired rights. And naturally now it all comes back on *me*. A stupid sort of day this has been. And it's my children they keep on here in order to frighten away this cadging woman, who's given them all such a scare. It's my poor daughter who is expected to soothe the old man's irritation against *them*, and who has to be taken into a common pothouse and made drunk! But I'll have no more of it! That's enough! I shall take them away. Nick may get out of it as best he can. . . . And this confounded gun sticking into my ribs. . . . Let's have no more of you, my boy! Just you chuck it! Bang!

"Oh, damn it all, that's done the trick! Who ever would have thought a gun-stock could fly into pieces like a bit of glass! I didn't throw it hard either. It pitched on to that stone. An absolutely perfect bit of wood. Faultlessly made. Split down its whole length. Sheer imbecility. I can never own up to it. I shall be obliged to say I tripped over a snag. A grotesque spectacle a man in a temper makes of himself. You're simply grotesque and you've been so all day. A man relieving his feelings by smashing a valuable gun. Why not roll on the ground at once and scratch your face? A thorough good horse-whipping is what you want. Yes, you're grotesque, you're . . .

"Hullo! That's rather funny. 'You'; why 'you'? I don't apostrophise myself like that as a rule. I once had a Swiss valet who always talked to himself in the second person. 'Yes Sir, I won't forget; now, John, you'll make sure the door's properly locked.' A queer notion, to divide oneself in two in that way, to talk to oneself as one might to one's image in the glass. Is it a habit peculiar to the

Swiss ? Very odd. Somehow I don't ever feel myself in two pieces. It might be rather convenient if one wanted to say something disagreeable to oneself. 'You're an abject being.' Quite true, you are ; but not irremediably so, as I still have enough self-respect left to accuse you of it. Whereas, 'I am abject,' is really too depressing. Who knows, when just now I caught myself. . . . What was I saying to myself ? . . . Oh yes : 'You're grotesque '. . . Who knows whether it wasn't rather an ingenious way of making the reflection without its being too disagreeable ?

" 'You're grotesque, Louis, because you've been losing your temper. And why this rage, my good fellow ? Because you conducted that conversation with your father like an absolute greenhorn, and instead of removing difficulties, you rather aggravated them. And why this fiery eloquence against your brother who is in no way to blame ? . . .' Ah, now, this is getting more complicated. . . . I think we shall have to go back to the story of the old overcoat. When I say, 'Nick lives like a mangy rat,' I always see him in that coat, much too tight for him and with the sleeves half-way up his long arms. An old, ill-used, thread-bare coat of mine, but good enough for him before he had begun going to the *lycée*. I can see him now going downstairs before me. 'Grr—what a guy ! What a guy ! ' And I used to try and wipe my boots on him. . . . And yet sometimes he wears quite decent clothes ; but I always think of him in that ridiculous coat, dragging at the buttons so that it wrinkled right across his back.

" It's a curious kind of performance this—what they call 'self-examination,' no doubt. Rather unpleasant it must be for the perspicacious ! I should like to know if anything can be left when one really goes to work with determination and desire to get to the bottom of things. Mere ribbons ; no doubt. . . . Very sedative for the passions : that I can truthfully assert. Unless I am feeling the effects of the sitz-bath these wretched leaves have kindly provided for me. . . . My word, I've been sitting in a positive tub !

" The very best make of English gun. All the same, I can't possibly confess the truth. I shall say I slipped ; and then tried to save myself by the stock ; and it was a miracle the gun didn't go off. And that's how accidents occur, my dears ! "

VIII

SNOW is falling in thick stormy gusts and all the trains are late. Tired of waiting for the last express, the night staff have abandoned the buried lines and railway yards and have taken refuge somewhere round a stove. Nicholas has only to walk a few steps along the deserted platform for the curtain of snowflakes to close behind him and the station lights to become a confused glimmer. A moment ago he could still make out the rails in the whirling whiteness, but now he might as well be going along a cart-track or up and down a field where deep ruts cross and re-cross each other.

Past midnight. A few shadows come to life through the darkness, and at last the train comes puffing through the frosty air into the station. Jourdaine gives a cry of delight at the sight of the spectral Esquimau emerging from the mist and snow to take possession of her suit-case. But before he has said three words, her cheerfulness vanishes. She stands on the platform questioning him, unmindful of the wet snow falling on her face. The few travellers have hurried towards the exit. The porter shouts :

" Hi ! Hi there ! I'm closing."

After locking the gate, he can see these two eccentrics continuing their discussion in the road by the side of their car. The man still has the suit-case in his hand and from time to time a shake of his head dislodges the snow weighing down the brim of his hat.

" Now, my dear child, be reasonable. You'll get soaked."

" What does it matter ? "

" At any rate, there's no question of your going back to-night ; so you might just as well get into shelter in the car and we'll try and get to Saint Saturnin. Fortunately, I know the road as well as I do the inside of my house."

While he endeavours to scrape away the frost that has

formed over the window-panes, she gets into the car, but still leans her head through the open window in the falling snow.

"And how did he break it to you?"

"He didn't say a word to anyone. . . . For heaven's sake now, you'll only make yourself ill."

She sits back, but finding he cannot hear her questions, leans her head out again:

"But he must have given some orders to Jenny?"

"No, not any; he was evidently suspicious. . . . I hope I shall be able to see well enough to drive."

He settles himself in his seat, gets into gear and begins finding his way slowly through the blinding mass of snow-flakes.

"But, Nick, you know perfectly well in the kitchen they read the addresses of all our letters. So how could he have kept up a correspondence without our hearing of it? . . . He has such a flow of words, he gives himself away like a child. And you never noticed anything?"

Nicholas, preoccupied though he is, does his best to answer the stream of questions.

"No, excepting that yesterday morning he seemed very impatient to get his letters."

"Of course, of course! All was lost if he didn't succeed before I got back."

"And you see it was only by a hair's breadth. . . . (Curse this snow! . . .) for it only broke on us at eight o'clock this evening. . . . Look out now, we must be near the bridge."

"And he said so sweetly to me before I went away, 'I shall follow your advice. I shall engage someone to go out with me, and I'm glad to think I shall stop being a burden on you all.'"

"Well, he has kept his word."

"The truth is," she exclaims, "that for these last two months we've been mistaken as to the nature of this attachment."

"Not at all! We weren't mistaken."

" But then how . . ."

Nicholas stops the car, opens the door and puts out a leg. He can feel there is grass underfoot.

" Yes, just as I thought, we're on the footpath. All the same, we may be able to manage another mile or two. There are no trees and the ditches aren't deep.

" On the contrary," he goes on when he has taken his seat again, " I could swear he thinks himself absolutely irreproachable. That's the very reason he's so audacious."

" Then, by appealing to Mother's memory, we might induce him to . . ."

Although apparently too much engrossed to hear what she is saying, he replies after a while :

" Induce him not to have Ninette to the house ? But supposing he were to join her somewhere else ? "

" No, let him choose between her and us ! "

" Dear, dear ! You seem to be very sure of yourself. . . . (It's not snow now, it's regular gruel ! We should get along quicker on foot.)"

" Oh, my dear Nick, if you only knew how little anxious I am to get there !

" The situation is intolerable," she begins again after a moment. " No, I shall never have patience enough ! I shall leave to-morrow."

" Yes, of course you can leave. And so can Jenny, as she would have done this evening if I hadn't implored her to avoid an open scandal. You must expect her sister to fall ill now, as she always does when Jenny's upset about anything and would rather not see us for three or four weeks. But if you go away in the hope of his asking you to return, you run the risk of having to wait a long time."

" Ninette will soon get tired of it. Even on her first visit she seemed bored to death."

" Which hasn't prevented her from coming back. So some argument must have been found strong enough to get over her reluctance."

" Then in your opinion . . . For I know Jenny ; I shall

find her sitting on the bench in the hall. . . . In five minutes' time we shall at least have to look as if we had settled something."

" I don't suppose . . . Damn it all ! Now we're in for it ! "

Very softly and quietly, the car has tilted over to the right. Nicholas gets out, muttering a string of oaths, and then comes back.

" My poor girl, there's nothing to be done. I deserve to be ducked in the horse-pond ! I took those trees of old Mother Camus's for the trees at the cross-roads. You needn't have been so afraid of getting there in five minutes ! . . . I'll go and fetch the farm cart for you."

But Jourdaine is already out on the road. " Certainly not ! We'll walk. It's barely more than a mile. And I've got gaiters and a good thick coat."

" As you please. Then I'll take your suit-case. Do abuse me a little. Anyhow, we shall have plenty of time to discuss our tactics."

But the stinging darkness is alive with invisible swarms which make walking more difficult than they had supposed. With every breath of cold air, winter seems to penetrate to their very thoughts. Their steps make no sound on the soft, woolly ground. All that meets the ear is the gentle thud of snow falling upon snow in a multitudinous patter.

Jourdaine starts when he says (though his voice is low, for he is holding her by the arm) :

" It was in this kind of weather that Ivanoff had to escape from his home, dressed in a groom's caftan and carrying the family plate in an old potato-sack. As for us, we are going to a well-warmed house, going to our beds. But think what it would be like if we were walking in the opposite direction, towards an empty, hostile horizon ; only try turning round for a bit. Yes, just try—only for a second. Doesn't one feel small directly, and lost ? And if you only go two steps, you feel as if you were leaving the whole of your inside behind you ! "

After a moment's pause, he continues :

"The other day, I had to go to Cour-Marie—that little farm that came to me from Renée—about some repairs. Do you know, when you come to look at it, it's really quite habitable."

"Why, Nick, you're surely not thinking of . . . ?"

"No, certainly not. But you know what I'm like. I feel much happier when I have a reserve trench to fall back on. . . . If only the snow wouldn't get down one's neck !"

"As for me," she murmurs, "my reserve trench was Saint Saturnin."

"That's a reason for staying there. Come, cheer up ! We shan't be eaten alive ! By Jove, no, we mustn't run away. But if we're to make a really good defence, we must preserve our independence and have no favours to ask. My position is rather a ticklish one. Hello ! Here's the drive. We're all right now, but look out for the trees !"

Their progress is even slower now than it was on the road.

"Keep to the left ; mind the seat !"

Their desire to get to the end of their journey keeps them silent, and when her brother does speak, Jourdaine hardly replies. He thinks she is benumbed with cold.

"You shall have a good hot jorum as soon as we get in. You'll hardly be able to walk upstairs !"

Again she doesn't hear him.

"What did you say ?"

IX

From Jourdaine

One result of preaching courage to others is that one ends in being convinced by one's own arguments. Last night you would hardly have recognised your Jourdaine in the wreck Nick brought back to the house ; and for once in a way you would not have been able to reproach me with that " unfeeling pride " on which you rely, however much you dislike it. At the same time I swear that if I was so much taken aback by the news that Ninette had returned to Saint Saturnin and had been installed in all the rights and privileges of a lady companion, it was not because I was overwhelmed by the prospect of the endless annoyances her presence will entail ; it was not even by the grief of seeing how much my poor father's strange obsessions had increased, and the impossibility of recognising in him the kindly, fair-minded man he once was. No, what seemed to me so hard to bear was the thought of the difficulty I should find in keeping the promise I made you. You know well enough how much I disliked doing what you wanted ; you can't have forgotten all the objections I made before consenting ; so that you will inevitably slip into believing that I have made haste to surrender at the first check. It is pretty obvious that any favour asked in the present circumstances would most probably be granted at once ; it would be too good an opportunity of overcoming my opposition, which, although it has never been openly declared, is recognised and feared, and which might at any moment become troublesome. But you must see that, however tacit the bargain, it would plainly be selling for money down my consent to anything that might occur later, no matter how painful or absurd. I have been going over this argument ever since yesterday, and the more I consider it the fewer loopholes can I find in it. Please let me have a few days' respite and perhaps I shall see things in a more hopeful light. But the secrecy in which my father has seen fit to wrap this affair makes me fear there is something more ambiguous about it than I care to contemplate.

I am writing by this morning's post so as not to leave you with any misleading hopes. I have no doubt that in any case my father will let me have Mother's small amount of jewellery. You know I set no store by it and you can dispose of it as you like.

It is hardly necessary to add that my brothers have no more suspicion now of all these worries than they have ever had, although last night in the car I overwhelmed the unfortunate Nick with such a flood of impatient questions, when he was half blinded with the snow, that he ended by upsetting us into a ditch.

I have hardly any courage left to tell you what otherwise I should have been so proud to let you know. I managed to see you know whom in Paris, and to give him your report. They had been anxiously expecting the document. If, in spite of the ambassador's indolence and the naval attaché's whims, the negotiations are progressing in a quite unhoped for way, it is entirely owing to the information received from you. They are deeply grateful for it at the ministry. Again and again they repeated, " We go entirely by what de Sinnis thinks ; all the rest of them seem to be in the clouds."

We are badly in need here too of clear eyes and sound judgment—rather alarming, perhaps, when things are going well, but what a stand-by and comfort they would be in the perplexities we are groping among !

" You think so ? "

" That's what people are saying. . . ."

" Bichet, he says to me . . ."

" Do you know that on Sunday Mr. William . . ."

" Have you noticed the little ladies aren't anywhere about now ? "

" Is Mr. Nicholas wanting to draw up a lease, that he's been getting three sheets of stamped paper off me ? " says the lady clerk in the registrar's office.

" I should very much like to know," says the deputy-mayor, " I should very much like to know . . . Julie, just run and look out of the window on the landing and see if Mme de Sinnis turns to the right."

The farmer at Les Houlettes has heard of it from the baker's wife at White Gates.

"They made Créte miss the train last Tuesday, because their clock has left off striking punctually at twelve o'clock as it used to. I sometimes wonder . . . yes, I wonder whether . . ."

Old Petout, who was making himself comfortable behind the hedge, took a good look through it at the same time.

"He was poking about in the weeds with his bill-hook, was Mr. Nicholas ; and sure enough, boys, he found one. He kept twisting the snare about in his fingers. Who can be setting them that way under the very nose of that good faithful keeper of his? 'My lad,' I was itching to say, 'who is it getting between Perret's sheets, tell me that? Then mustn't Perret be let out of bed for an hour or two to look after his own little jobs? ' But Mr. Nicholas's head is full of other things."

At the church door, after mass, the gossip runs :

"My word ! They won't like that. . . ."

"Babet told *me* that . . ."

"I don't know, but . . ."

"Sometimes . . ."

"You never can tell . . ."

From Jourdaine

Dearest Boy,

Don't feel yourself obliged to answer all my letters. I've come to the conclusion there are too many of them and that they are growing rather like the cacklings of a mother hen. But they are my only form of recreation and the intervals between them are too terribly tedious. Your Uncle Nick is better off ; he can escape to his books whenever he likes and find a refuge in them without disturbing anyone. Looking through the shelves in his study, I was astounded to see the number of subjects he takes an interest in. One imagines him absorbed in jobs

of the most humdrum description and then it gradually dawns upon one that his mind has endless unexpected retreats, corners known to himself alone, which he has arranged with the greatest care, with what I might almost call an ingenious feeling for comfort—for he combines his rustic theories with a most amusing kind of epicureanism. The other day he lent me a volume by some philosopher or other, declaring that in the company of such a sage, it was marvellously possible to forget all one's cares ; but I must confess I failed to find in it the peace of mind he had promised. No, my thoughts, when they fly away, take one road only, a mule-path climbing up into the mountains. And right at the top, I come to a little village of flat-roofed huts. In the distance I can see the red fezes moving against the snow, and recognise a pair of skis outside a door. " Be so good as to ask if the Lieutenant can see me. I won't keep him long." And of course I always stay a little longer than I had meant to.

Where did I last stop in my chronicle of strange events ? Did I tell you that Louis's two daughters have left us ? They had to get back to their studies. Besides which, since the little escapade I told you of, Laurette had a nervous terror of being left with her grandfather and he seemed to get irritated himself, even with dear little Marianne. He may have read some criticism in their candid eyes ; at any rate, they only seemed to annoy him.

Lest I should fall into the same disgrace myself, I have taken to the most ingenious tactics. I avoid making a third, except for meals and in the evening, but to prevent their forgetting my presence altogether, I appear now and then unexpectedly at a turn of the path, or take it into my head to go and put a log on the drawing-room fire. It would make you laugh to see Ninette refining on all the shades of politeness in order to emphasise her subordinate position. I should distrust her less if I could see her be more honestly herself. Apparently the servants have not played her any tricks so far. I spend infinite time and trouble in keeping them in a peaceful frame of mind, although I never question or confide in anyone. To punish me for my reserve in this respect, Jenny is now in the sulks. My days are spent in these little pastimes, and so this melancholy January is gradually slipping away.

But the cream of it all came just now as I was sitting down to

write to you. I was told that Mr. Nicholas not being about anywhere, the builder wished to speak to me. My father had sent for him to tell him to make plans for a scheme so extraordinary that at first I couldn't take it in ; neither more nor less than the entire re-modelling of the dear old house and the enlargement of both the wings. Even the staircase was to be moved in order to make the entrance hall grander. The whole thing struck the worthy man as being so unreasonable and so extravagant that he hesitated to take such a fantastic notion seriously. In my first feeling of bewilderment, I was inclined to think like him that it was nothing but idle talk ; but all at once I seemed to see a possible explanation of all this folly. Wasn't it an attempt to get rid of that fellow Nick, against whom there were all kinds of grievances, to force him to find a lodging for himself elsewhere? And I myself? Wouldn't it be a relief if I declared myself unable to live in the midst of all the painting and plastering? This is only a suspicion, and a very black one ; but I saw at once that we must act prudently and I managed to persuade the builder to let your grandfather have a few sketches to amuse himself with in the meantime, until he takes some other fancy into his head—a little less absurd, we'll hope.

But the more I think of it, the more my explanation appears to be the probable one. If I am right, this plan was not conceived yesterday and will not vanish of its own accord ; and if no opposition is made to it, what will come next? Should it be openly objected to? Or should time be gained by covert resistance? But what good will it do us if by dint of a little wretched contriving, we gain a week or two, when what is looming ahead of us is a bottomless abyss of still other weeks, months, perhaps years!

But now you will be thinking I'm making myself foolishly anxious, when the only thing to be at all melancholy about really is the folly of a poor old man. . . . Anyhow, write me a line, beloved Lieutenant, and scold me for my imaginary terror.

"Listen, Marie, I can hear them scraping their boots on the scraper."

"What did I tell you? Look at the clock. Every day they come in from their walk a few minutes later."

" I was polishing my harness behind the stable door and I could hear all they were saying. The ' legislation of our country ' says he ; and ' I quite agree with you,' says she to him."

" Ah yes, they just can talk ! "

" Hi ! Charles, leave digging ! "

" What d'you want ? "

" Come along here, I tell you. Just smell me ! "

" Wherever did you get that kind of smell ? "

" Cut along to the wash-house, you'll find them two girls there, Marie and Josephine. Marie says she must smear herself all over with scent, says she. And Josephine, she's put it all o'one side in a bit of newspaper, for curiosity's sake. Some kind of pink silk frippery. Run and put your nose to it before she begins her washing."

" When he gives her his arm . . . "

" Well ? "

" Well, my girl, put on your spectacles."

" But what for, Mademoiselle ? "

" Why so as to see better."

" And what is it you've noticed yourself ? "

" Why, my poor child, it's as plain as a pike-staff. He puts out his fingers very gently. He thinks no one can possibly see him. And, I give you my word of honour, he begins patting her hand ! I've seen him. *He pats-her-on-the-hand !* "

FROM AMÉDÉE DE SINNIS

My precious Jourdaine,

I have been given a whole heap of charming messages for you from dozens of people I have just been seeing at a deadly reception. You have no idea how popular you are. Everyone pities you from the bottom of their hearts, but no one guesses how much you deserve to be pitied.

For in your case, my dear, one can't even help you bv applying a

touch of that make-up with which the face of truth may be sometimes a little improved. I am ashamed to say that where you are concerned, I am unable to be anything but truthful ; not from virtue, alas, but because I have already made use of too many artifices and allowed your eyes to unravel the windings of too many deceits. So, speaking with absolute sincerity, or to put it more accurately feeling it utterly impossible not to be frank, I must tell you that my affairs are not as flourishing as I should wish ; but with a little patience, I shall certainly succeed in setting them straight. In any case, my worries are nothing to yours, so that you must let me say nothing more about them until I can tell you I have got rid of them for once and for all.

It is about Louis I want to speak to you. I daresay you know he is on the board of a new company, and has to come to London to attend it. I hear already that his straightforwardness, his go, his energy and independence have made a great impression here. He has been immediately accepted as one of the few men of whom it is felt that as long as they keep standing, no cataclysm will ever be really disastrous. I have done my best to corroborate this opinion, which I entirely share ; and I was therefore exceedingly astonished, in the course of a meal we had together, to find something very odd in his attitude. As he appeared to me to be taking the troubles at Saint Saturnin rather lightly, I thought it right to inspire a few misgivings. For the matter of that, I should think it quite natural if his present concerns were on such a scale as to reduce the importance of Saint Saturnin to a negligible quantity. But from his evasive answers I very soon began to wonder if he were as confident as he wished to appear, or if he were not merely anxious to put aside a troublesome problem. He reminded me of one of those athletes who are able to twist iron bars and lift cannon-balls but who, they tell one, have something seriously wrong with their heart or kidneys. Observe him carefully the next time he goes to see you. I couldn't say exactly what it is, but there's a screw loose somewhere. His wife's absence may have something to do with it—in my spitefulness, I was going to add—supposing a man of his stamp could miss Reine anywhere excepting from his bed. And perhaps the fact may simply be that he's not sleeping so well. . . .

And now, to put myself right with Reine, whose charming qualities I thoroughly appreciate, as you know very well, I hasten to add that, with her gracious ways and right instincts, she would very likely help you at Saint Saturnin more efficaciously and sensibly than he. You must do all you can not to let her lose interest in your difficulties.

A remark of your father's has just come back to my mind. You might make use of it if the poor man is still obsessed by his architecture. One day as I was walking with him in the avenue, I remember his saying to me, " I don't like magnificence in buildings. There is something indiscreet and ostentatious about it. But there is nothing in the regal grandeur of an avenue that can offend." He is still clear-headed enough to be flattered by being reminded of such a delightful saying.

X

THIS is the hour when the mice begin scampering overhead—a familiar sound to all watchers in the dark—a signal that men have at last sunk into silence and that the house is given over now to tripping sprites, to elves, to dreams.

Jourdaine, however, hears something else. The noise is not overhead ; the gentle rustling seems to be travelling nearer along the wall. She listens again ; it has reached her door. She turns up the light, slips on a dressing-gown and peeps out.

"Is that you, Jenny ?"

The housekeeper, dazzled by the light, blinks her eyes.

"I thought . . . I didn't want to wake you."

"But what's the matter ?"

Mlle Cheu nods her head in the direction of the rooms on the floor below.

"But what is it, Jenny ?"

"Will you come and see for yourself . . . ?"

As Jourdaine makes no movement, she adds :

"Last night too !"

"Mme Tavernier ? . . ."

"I expect so."

Jourdaine regrets not having pulled the bedclothes over her head and pretended to be asleep.

"Wasn't it just a light you saw ? Or heard talking ? My father often talks to himself."

"I shouldn't have disturbed you for that."

"But then how do you know . . . ?"

"When it's absolutely necessary to know, Madame," replies Jenny somewhat haughtily, "it can always be managed."

Poor, faithful watch-dog ! (The farmer at La Mérouviére let his stable-man be murdered once upon a time by two

horse-thieves, because when he heard his dog barking, he shouted angrily to him to be quiet and go back to his kennel, instead of going down and seeing what the faithful beast was growling at.)

"When you see," Mlle Cheu continues, "the shocking scene that's going on . . ."

"I'll just get my dress on," says Jourdaine, "and come with you."

Mlle Cheu leads the way down the dark passage. Jourdaine has to follow in the same manner, walking on tip-toe and feeling the way with one hand along the wall-paper and the glass of the picture-frames. Then comes the staircase, and they have to be still more careful—step by step—down—down. Down towards God knows what shameful discovery ? The bedroom door is reached. Sure enough, two voices can be heard.

"It's true," Jourdaine whispers, "she's there. . . . Thank you, Jenny. . . . I can bear witness to it myself. . . ."

She is already drawing back, but Mlle Cheu pulls her by the arm.

"Into the dressing-room !"

Here a light is shining through the crack of an ill-fitting door. Jourdaine stands still. The bright rays are shut off or become visible again as Jenny moves to and fro. Once more she feels a hand on her sleeve. . . .

"Come and see."

"No, Jenny."

"You must !"

"I won't."

"But you can't allow such a thing ! She's been ferreting in your mother's wardrobes. Very well then, I shall go in myself. I shall say I saw the light."

But Jourdaine stops her, and comes to a quick decision.

"No, it's my business."

She approaches the door, knocks gently and then opens without waiting for an answer. In the first shock at what she sees, she feels her legs give way under her.

Her mother—sitting by the old man's bed ! Her mother—seen from behind in her hat and walking things, her fur tie round her neck, one gloved hand on the handle of her parasol ! But at the sound of her step, the apparition turns round. . . .

The cry Jourdaine tries to utter turns to a few choking words ; but her indignation is too great to be very loud.

" What does this masquerading mean ? . . . Take that off ! Take that off ! "

She seizes on the tie, the hat. . . .

" How dare you ? . . . Get out of that dress at once ! "

Mme Tavernier tears at the gloves and only gets them off with difficulty, for they have been pulled on over all Elisabeth's rings.

" Your father . . . " she stammers, " took it into his head . . . "

" Now the dress ! At once ! At once ! If you're naked underneath, so much the worse for you ! "

There is a brooch to be unpinned first. Mme Tavernier is not naked, but she takes shelter behind a curtain to unhook the black satin dress and put on her own again.

" I swear," she wails, " that it's not my fault. . . . "

" And now go back to your own room. . . . Don't carry that necklace off with you, please ! "

Ninette's trembling fingers at last manage to undo the clasp.

"And take away those ear-rings you've left on the table."

At last she has gone ! Jourdaine has to make an effort before daring to look at her father. He keeps his eyes lowered. Has he spoken since the scene began ? She has heard nothing. She hesitates, draws nearer.

" How could you tolerate such a spectacle ? " she murmurs, when she is quite close to him.

At this he turns on her a look of almost passionate sorrow.

" Why," says he in a low voice, " why, my child, do you bereave me of your mother's memory ? "

She feels so much disarmed by the grief in his eyes that she kneels down by the bed unable to restrain her tears.

" But this is not the way, my poor dear father, to bring her back to us."

He remains motionless.

" You none of you understand how I suffer," he murmurs after a moment.

" Indeed, indeed, we do understand."

" You can't understand how much I love her," he adds in a still lower voice.

What does he mean ? Will he himself correct this ambiguous utterance ? Jourdaine waits, hoping that other words may come. Her father has now shut his eyes ; he lies without stirring, like a man who is asleep. Perhaps his troubled mind has really been able to take refuge, to drown itself in sleep. She stands up and with ungentle hands straightens sheets and pillow. Let him wake up and speak. He has fled as far as possible ; he has taken himself out of reach ; but he must have something to say, he must be listened to before this growing disgust becomes altogether uncontrollable. She shakes him by the shoulder. At last he opens his eyes and looks at her. . . .

Alas, no. Let them close again, and quickly !

XI

As Nicholas perceives Mme Tavernier coming towards him along the farm road, he glances at his watch in surprise. No, he has not taken leave of his senses ! It is not yet eight, half-past seven only in the morning.

" Have you seen Jourdaine ? " she asks.

" No, what's the matter ? "

" Something extremely painful. . . . A most horrible situation. . . . "

The habit of conversing with peasants has developed in Nicholas a certain amount of prudence, and he is not inclined to commit himself in a hurry. He looks curiously at the agitated woman, standing bare-headed in the cold February mist.

" I thought perhaps your sister . . . " she continues, " I almost hoped . . . I should not have the humiliation of explaining to you myself. . . . "

" Oh," says Nicholas good-humouredly, " you know I'm quite unprejudiced. Perhaps we'd better go this way, if you don't want all Variville to hear the story to-morrow."

She follows him passively.

" Oh dear," she murmurs, " you're imagining the most dreadful things already."

" I made no insinuation, Ninette."

She walks through the puddles without paying any attention to them.

" My most unpardonable mistake was in thinking I could extricate myself without help. I did try to speak to Jourdaine, but she didn't understand, or rather wouldn't understand. . . . She can be so cold. . . . You are all so distant ! "

" Come now, you can't say that of me, Ninette ! I'm just part of the landscape, not to say of the livestock."

This way of talking completes her discomfort.

" Not you, perhaps," she stutters. . . . " But it's so easy to throw all the responsibility on to the woman. . . . Wouldn't you have thought me guilty of all sorts of intrigues if I had come and revealed that your father . . ."

" ' Reveal,' Ninette ? Isn't that saying rather much ? For one needn't be very sharp-sighted. . . ."

" To see what ? " she asks nervously.

" To see that my father's attentions to you are of a rather painful description."

" Ah yes, painful ! But not only in the way you seem to think. . . . They're painful because of the respect . . . yes, Nicholas, the respect I have for Cousin Elisabeth's memory. Perhaps you're astonished at my saying that. I know she wasn't well-disposed towards me. She judged me by appearances and I should have been justified in bearing her a grudge for it. . . . Not that anyone has said much about her to me since I came to Saint Saturnin. Sometimes your father ; you and Jourdaine never . . . but there are things one can understand without words. . . . I tell you honestly I can measure the whole chasm that exists between what she stood for and what I may be worth myself. . . . So that the idea of succeeding her in this house—of taking her place among you all . . ."

Nicholas stands still. He looks so blank that she doesn't know what to say next.

" I never tried to attract him, I swear. At first I didn't understand. He used to say, ' I should like you to do your hair differently,' or else, ' Fold your hands on your lap.' . . . Jourdaine has no idea of the whims I had to stand out against. . . . Even that dreadful pad of false hair, that thing your mother wore under her chignon . . . He tried to make me . . . but that I really could not do ! "

Nicholas, having quite lost all his bearings, appears to be concentrating his attention on Mme Tavernier's cape, on which the mist has deposited a velvety layer of minute droplets. Feeling slightly encouraged, Ninette proceeds

" Like every other woman left alone in the world, I have dreamed at times of being able to make another home for myself. . . . But I swear to you that even when he kisses my hands and implores me with tears to be his wife, I feel . . . No, no, it mustn't be. . . . This morning, I meant to leave without seeing anyone, but I didn't know how to manage it. . . . I'll do whatever you like. . . . Please, Nicholas, advise me."

Ninette's distress does not seem feigned ; indeed, amongst all these absurdities, it appears to Nicholas to be the only thing so far that has any reality. He is no believer, however, in impromptu decisions.

" Well, you know," he says, in order to gain time, " marriages . . . I'm the Mayor of the parish, and as long as I don't put on my badge of office. . . ."

The joke is not in the best of taste, but then the whole affair is so completely without head or tail ! By what grotesque set of circumstances are they both there walking along this path, under these dripping trees, among this drenched bracken, in a landscape in which the phantom trunks and branches look like seaweed at the bottom of a pool of grey water ?

" I only ask you one favour," Mme Tavernier's voice begins again at his side. " Spare me from having to meet Jourdaine."

Yes, Jourdaine. . . . What has happened ? . . . Why hasn't she told him anything ? True, it's not yet eight. In this fog one hardly knows whether it's morning or evening.

" Walk on the dead leaves," he says ; " the mud's so thick you'll be losing your shoes in it."

XII

Two days later, Louis, at his brother's request, has been set down at the entrance to the drive and has reached the house in the dark without being seen by anyone. He will leave again in the same way next morning, so that there will be no chance of his father's hearing of his visit. This air of conspiracy irritates him, and is really quite unnecessary. The situation seems pretty simple. There is nothing, thinks he, like putting things on paper—the pros and the cons, in black and white. A more enterprising woman than Ninette might certainly attempt an intrigue on a large scale ; might marry, appropriate, rifle, clear the place out in a few months. But, *firstly* : she doesn't appear to have the necessary determination and cynicism for such a risky attempt ; *secondly* : possibly even, if an appeal were made to her conscience, she might be found capable of a certain amount of delicacy ; *thirdly* : her ambition appears limited to the picking up of a few trifling sums here and there. Just a little home industry. We must all live. And as she will be fully compensated and relieved of all her money difficulties, no doubt she will be only too glad to disappear.

Louis, however, has brought them down a new fact. According to information received, Ninette has been publicly consorting all that autumn with a man a great deal younger than herself. If it is true that she's become enamoured of a professional dancer, she will never be able to endure all the disagreeables entailed in the conquest of an aged invalid. On this, Jourdaine had protested that her brother knew nothing whatever about women, and that it is only now that she has heard of the existence of this young man, that she has begun to have any fear of Ninette.

The conversation taking place before the fire in Nicholas's study might easily go on all night. It is time, however, to come to some conclusion.

"We are all agreed," says Louis, "on the practical steps that must be taken. But as for the motives we are governed by, I should like to make it quite clear that they are entirely different—in fact, I might almost say contradictory. Where you see only an old man in his dotage, I see a disabled workman. Just a shade of difference in the point of view, but it puts quite another light on things. I like to believe, Nicholas, that you make some difference between an old drunkard dying of delirium tremens and a cowman riddled with rheumatism who has milked your cows for you for fifty years in the rain. At any rate, in industry one draws a distinction. You know quite well that Father wore himself out by working too strenuously and by neglecting his health in consequence. And you know quite well too that he didn't lead this life of over-exertion because he liked it. It was for our sakes he imposed this task on himself and because he had a kind of scrupulous idea that a man has to give an account of any powers he may possess and that those he hasn't made use of will be a weight on his conscience!"

He continues, tongs in hand, building up for the tenth time a crafty edifice of red-hot embers.

"It's the same old story of the soldiers who got themselves smashed up. . . . No, Jourdaine, what I'm saying cannot be taken for granted; it's not a platform commonplace. I say that there are plenty of charming old gentlemen, full of attentions to their friends and acquaintances, who have no infirmities to complain of, without either wooden legs or ugly scars on their faces. All the world is grateful to them for being what they are, and all the world shuts its eyes on the past and on what it has cost to preserve their sprightly humour and fresh, rosy complexions. Father has none of their amiability. He is contradictious; he is soured; he makes himself miserable. Whose fault is it? His own, you will say. What was there to prevent him from sparing

himself at the proper time and finding himself a safe, comfortable job like the others ? "

Who in the world is it Louis is so angry with ? No one has said anything to provoke this tantrum. Against what imaginary antagonist is all this vehemence directed ? Nicholas wants to put a stop to it.

" All that remains now," he says, " is to see whether Ninette will accept our plan. I think Father has gone upstairs, and she will be waiting for me in the drawing-room, as she promised. Then you're quite agreed ? Departure under pretext of shopping ; letter, breaking off relations ; and disappearance. And I offer the sum we said. Would you like me to read the draft letter again ? I don't think it would be possible to have more consideration for her self-respect or for my father's feelings. I still persist in thinking the letter a little too well written, I mean in rather too restrained a style ; especially the passage on ' the apparent ingratitude ' and ' the desire to spare unnecessary pain.' Still, it's not of much importance ; let's stick to it. . . . While you're waiting for me to come back, you can make yourselves some tea. You'll find everything you want on the table."

But after his departure, neither brother nor sister move from the fireside.

" In another half-hour," murmurs Jourdaine, " we may be able to breathe again. Unless during these last two days Father has been promising her . . ."

The problem for Louis is elsewhere than in the difficulties of the moment. He still pursues his idea.

" I'm afraid I didn't make myself clear just now. You see it's a matter I've always thought about a great deal—the marks of wear, the kind of dignity a thing acquires when it has fulfilled its purpose. I know all the objections that may be made. But when a man reaches the end of his life without any sort of fatigue, it may be so much the better for him perhaps ; but I doubt whether he can ever have been possessed with any overpowering enthusiasm or whether he

deserves much respect. Besides, at bottom, Jourdaine, you entirely agree with me that we aren't precious marvels to be preserved and handed down to posterity, but rather machines whose end in any case is to be broken up and thrown on to the scrap heap ; don't wrap them up in tissue paper then, but let them keep going as long as they will go."

Owing to lack of time and lack of friends, Louis has had few opportunities of airing his ideas in the light of day ; owing, in fact, to the lack of outside stimulus, he has almost forgotten what they look like in the depths of the limbo where they lie sleeping. This evening he lets himself go.

"I confess my feelings have altered very much in the course of the last three months. The impression made on me by my mother's death was so great that I was inclined to think there could be nothing higher than such perfect serenity, such—I might almost say—innocence of soul. Every other way of ending life seemed to me—how shall I put it ?—to partake of our own sordid troubles, to be tainted with impurity. But I think that, without my realising it, the fineness of her end had biased my judgment and deflected it in a sense not genuinely my own. I became more and more conscious of this the further her death receded into the past. Don't misunderstand what I'm going to say. . . . It's not that Mother's long life appeared to me less full, indeed no ! She could not have spent herself more generously. But all the same, when I compare their two lives . . . (I quite feel the shocking side of such a comparison. Please think of it only as a way of throwing light on something very difficult to express). Well, in spite of everything, in spite of the sort of scum that seems to be working its way to the surface now, Father's activity seems to me something higher, something stronger. Is it that I can sympathise more directly with the lot of a man ? . . . Yet no, such long sustained effort is the proof of an energy and perseverance which deserves to be marked a degree or two higher in the human scale of values. And besides, I can't overlook the

wider range of his activity, the greater number of beings affected by it."

Jourdaine could not explain what it is that shocks her in her brother's line of argument. Presumptuous statistics! "Can real influence be ever truly estimated?" she asks, and stretching out her hands to the fire, she watches the red glow of the light through her fingers, wondering what answer she can make, what words she can find to pit against words. But Louis sees at once that his disclosure has missed its mark and been wasted on empty air. As to that, it's what happens nearly always whenever one trots out this kind of thing. He'll take good care not to be caught again in a hurry. Fortunately he hears the door downstairs shut.

"I can hear Nicholas coming upstairs two at a time. So it must have gone off all right."

Sure enough Nicholas comes in smiling.

"I didn't know how to get away, she was so full of thanks. She'll leave to-night, if you like. She couldn't have been more perfect. Oh, my dear creatures, you don't know what a fine show you missed! Such a competition in good manners, such courteous encounters! She hardly seemed to have heard my speech about compensation! . . . I don't think she really has imagination enough to hope for a scoop that would make it worth her while to shut her eyes and swallow everything she would have to swallow here. As to her idyll, there can be no doubt whatever about that; she's too anxious to get back to Paris. I can't get it out of my head that she was sent here on special service. Well, she can go back now with a little plunder, quite sure of not being beaten. You'll see, one of these days we shall end by regretting her; for there's one thing quite certain (and I'm not joking now) Saint Saturnin has been a revelation to her of something she had never dreamed of, of something that has stirred her deepest feelings and . . . Well, I never! What laziness! You've never even boiled the water. For my part I could tackle a beefsteak."

But the others have not appetite enough to take a biscuit

from the plate. The three of them together, armed with all their privileges, have managed to intimidate a woman and spoil her prospects. But no sooner is one difficulty out of the way, than others arise.

"She's going," says Louis, "and a very good thing. But Father can't be left alone. . . ."

"I wish," says his sister, "it was the day after the day he gets the letter. Poor man, he'll find it hard to bear."

"And," Louis goes on, "we secure what's most essential, but don't let's forget that we shall have to pay for it by throwing something else overboard; we shall have to give in to other whims."

"Let him cover himself with ridicule in some electoral campaign or other?" asks Nicholas. "It won't be showing much concern for his dignity, will it? Then what? Let him pull down Saint Saturnin?"

Jourdaine exclaims, but Louis murmurs, "A house is only a house."

And as the others are silent, "Gain time," he adds; "that, of course, and limit the destruction as much as possible. Naturally we shall see to it that Nicholas doesn't suffer."

"If," ventures Jourdaine, "it's necessary to let him break a toy of some kind, couldn't we . . ."

But her elder brother interrupts her.

"He has broken nothing whatever so far. Wait till he begins at any rate. Even if he does pull the house down, it won't be a more expensive folly than if he had been keeping a mistress in a corner somewhere, however modestly. He has never indulged his fancies to the extent his work entitled him to."

Another silence. Must Jourdaine always be on the stingy side?

"The experiment may carry us far," she says, feeling irritated with herself as she says it.

"But," replies her brother, "life itself may carry us far. You take it for a hack going round and round in a riding

school. And all of a sudden, it kicks up and bolts. . . . Fortunately ! "

He is to pass the rest of the night on Nicholas's sofa. But sleep is a shy and distant friend, difficult of approach, with whose signs of ill-humour he is very familiar. Instead of sinking drowsily into unconsciousness, his mind continues working at high speed. " Life kicks up and bolts, but the good rider can always master it." Not that Louis has any passionate love of riding ; and yet the vague images that stand in his mind for strength, pride and conquest are generally furnished by memories surviving in his muscles, in his thighs and arms—a man's memories of happy struggles with the beast between his knees ; of victories gained over the horse, the road, the wind. But in the uncomfortable state of insomnia, it is always in the same way that his sense of well-being is destroyed and replaced by apprehension. He is impeded in his progress and struggling with some hostile element. Sometimes, against a current of the sea (a survival this of a terror of his childhood, when one day while bathing, he had been almost carried away by the tide) ; sometimes, against a flood of human beings, by whom he is surrounded and suffocated (a horror left him from the time at the beginning of the war, when he has had to force a way for his company through the throngs of fugitives on the Northern road). The injury done to his nerves at this period, although he will not own to it, has never been properly healed. So that when he begins to see certain faces, always the same, with the same haggard look, filing past him to the right and left, he realises that the obsession is turning to nightmare and that it is time to turn on the light and open a book.

To-night there is no book handy. What about getting one out of Nicholas's bookcase ? He hesitates ; no, he's too lazy, too tired. He must just keep watch over himself ; surely he can ward off his phantoms unaided. But a man in bed

is never vigilant enough to escape the snares of approaching sleep. . . . The Mayor who was shot. . . . No, no ! No more of that old story ! . . . Louis tries in vain to break out of the circle round which this obsession of his has so often driven him. (The Mayor of a village, who had given offence by his resolute attitude, had been pushed out into the street, with his hands tied behind his back, his braces cut, his trousers falling down over his ankles, and stumbling, grotesque looking, had been shot down by rifle-fire.) Why, out of such millions of agonies, does he continually dwell on this one unfortunate man's ? But the mind has its own predilections, its own tendencies. For if the dignity of man is only to be sustained by six trouser buttons, if self-respect and courage, even though paid for by life itself, are to be at the mercy of a ridiculous bit of shirt, flapping in the wind, for brutes to make a target of . . . Good God, that's enough ! Louis knows towards what regions of nihilism this argument is taking him. Not that he dreams of glory ; chance alone disposes of that ; let it fall on whom it will ! But there is a kind of pride, a certain dignity of bearing, that we have acquired by hard work and discipline, that we have made our own. . . . If it is possible for derision to deprive us even of these. . . . The poor beggar must have prepared his answers as bravely as he knew how. One stands ready, and then bad luck makes a fool of me. . . . Louis is always haunted by the same fear—although he has never yet had a serious set-back—the fear of being caught unawares at some unexpected turn, the fear of being made to look small. The match is never won once for all. It may still be lost. I may lose it. You may lose it. . . . Enough, enough ! Surely there must be a book lying about somewhere. . . . As long as it's not a volume of poetry ! . . .

•

When Nicholas wakes him and asks how he has slept, he makes his usual reply :

" Very well."

And besides, as soon as his mind is clear, his carefully guarded thoughts know nothing that is not good for them to know, and never venture into forbidden territory.

He waits at the end of the drive for the car that is to fetch him. The landscape is bathed in the milky light of morning, the grass all glistening with hoar-frost. Not warm, by any means ! But on his cheeks, fresh from the razor, there lingers a delicious tingling, as if the rising sun were already caressing them, and the air tastes sweet and melts in the mouth like a water ice. By staring like this at sunrise, it will be possible to settle his business in the minimum number of hours. There is nothing that delights Louis more than successful combinations of this kind. To-night he is to sleep in Brussels, to-morrow at Zurich. He has been waiting quite three minutes already without beginning to feel impatient.

Through the iridescent haze, he watches, at the end of the road, a miserable looking vehicle creeping along toward him at a foot's pace. Every few seconds, the reins are shaken and the bit in the mouth of the old horse is given a tug by way of encouragement. A slight steam rises from its lean back, like smoke from a dying fire, damped down by ash and dew. On reaching the entrance to the drive, the beast is with difficulty induced to turn out of the road, through the gate-posts, and when at last it makes up its mind to pull the shafts round, one of the traces comes unfastened, and Louis sees, emerging from the hood, a Little Sister of the Poor. Notwithstanding the many shawls in which she is muffled, she jumps nimbly from the box to the ground. He goes up to her at once.

" Allow me, Sister ; let me fasten the chain for you."

But the accident appears to be a normal incident of the drive. It is all put to rights in a moment ; the Sister comes forward deliberately, saying with a countrified familiarity, as she rubs her hands in an effort to warm her frozen fingers :

" Mr. Louis ; I think ? . . . Yes. . . . Sister Emérantine

. . . yes . . . Mme de Sinnis sent us word. . . . She has clothing, linen, that she wants taken away at once. . . . Clothes that belonged to . . . that our poor old people . . . the dear lady will again be sending them . . . sending them from Heaven. . . . "

Her head droops lower and lower and Louis suddenly perceives that she has melted into tears.

" Oh, Mr. Louis, we've lost . . . such a support in trouble . . . a true mother ! "

A burst of sobbing breaks from the carriage.

" It's little Amélie Vasse," the Sister stammers. " You know, little Amélie Vasse."

The name means nothing to Louis. He nervously feels in his pocket for a note, but doesn't like to produce it.

" She's a novice in our house now," the nun continues. " After what happened, you see . . . "

A vague recollection dawns on Louis of a girl who had been accused of stealing. No doubt his mother had intervened.

" Poor child, without the dear lady . . . the poor child would no longer be among us. . . . "

A renewed burst of sobbing comes from under the hood. The nun climbs on to the step and affectionately pats a black clad shoulder ; for a moment the two women weep in each others' arms. Then the Sister's voice is heard again.

" It's the first time we've been back since . . . since . . . so you see . . . "

Then, turning round to Louis, she again calls him to witness :

" It's little Amélie Vasse. . . . "

XIII

It would still have been possible this morning to intercept the letter. But now an hour—two hours have gone by since he read it. . . . Jourdaine has not been into his room. He has not asked to see anyone. He has sent away Babet when she came as usual to put on his boots for him, a thing he now finds it difficult to do for himself.

Some kind of invisible frontier has now been crossed. The uncertain ridge—the watershed where the streams divide has been passed. This is the further slope. Only a few steps have been taken down it as yet, but it is already impossible to turn back. The path leads downwards—can only lead downwards now, more and more swiftly, more and more steeply.

Deception has been called in. Resistance has been entered upon. There is still the hope, no doubt, of keeping it subdued, of wrapping it round with kindness and consideration. But one lie inevitably leads to another. It will never be possible again to fix limits that shall not be transgressed.

As usual, the three children have been sent to wish their grandfather good morning ; but it is a tiresome job and they despatch it as quickly as possible, without a glance to right or left, so that when they leave the room, there is nothing to be got out of them.

A little later, as she crosses the landing, Mlle Cheu's sense of smell tells her that something is burning. She goes into the room and sees ashes of burnt paper lying on the carpet. " Good gracious ! " she exclaims, " is it possible for the wind to have blown the ashes as far as that ? " And Mr. Colombe replies from his arm-chair, " Oh, leave me alone ! There's been no wind at all." But to-day, no one knows why, she seems in a combative mood, and on her own initiative puts the guard in front of the fire. The episode upsets

her for the whole morning. Although she rather suspects the origin of the burnt paper, it is too good an opportunity to be missed for scolding Babet. " You've forgotten the fire-guard again ! " And as she passes the pantry door, " Naturally," she exclaims, " no fire-guard ! And then people wonder that houses are burnt down ! "

As soon as the first bell rings, Mr. Colombe sends word that he will have lunch in his room. And now the machinery is set in motion that will draw them all in. For if she is not to appear like an accomplice, Jourdaine must pretend ignorance and go to enquire after her father. On the way, she meets Nicholas.

" Good luck," he says. " As for me, I'm like a cautious army, driving a screen of women and children before it."

She comes upon him again a quarter of an hour later.

" He's in his arm-chair," she says, " and refuses to open his mouth. He looks rather stern with a sort of scowl on his face. I helped him to finish dressing, as he wasn't quite ready, but he seemed not to see me."

At about two o'clock, there is a report at the farm that Babet, as she was clearing the table, had heard him say, " I'll sack all these snails ! " But the gardener has a different version. " I'll smash them all like snails ! "

Towards the end of the day, Ivanoff goes into the stable to take the bull his feed of hay. Beside him old Elodie is driving the calves into their stall. The great male, fidgeted and excited by the stir around him, begins bellowing, twitches the muscles of his formidable neck and shoulders and rubs the iron ring in his nostrils against the bars of his manger.

" Aha ! " says the old woman, with a ribald little laugh, " he remembers he made them, and it still tickles him there where he's tickled ! "

Saying this, she turns round, and to her amazement beholds Mr. Colombe, who has come in without being heard. Although he may occasionally cross the yard, he has never yet been known to enter the sheds ; but however

unusual it may be to see him there, the cow-wife has been too many years on the place to lose her head for such a trifle. Putting on her most engaging smile, and pointing to the huge beast, she contents herself with translating her last remark into more ceremonious language.

" He's the father of the family ! "

There is a short silence. The old man turns his eyes from old Elodie to the Russian, and then back to Elodie. Drawing himself up, with his head well raised, he says in loud clear tones :

" You are not only right but you have made a most profound observation."

Elodie continues to smile, too much alarmed to leave off.

" The father of the family ! " goes on the old man. " When the people of to-day make use of this expression, one would think they had forgotten its meaning. They seem to have in their minds the image of a peaceful ox, but it is the bull they should be thinking of—the bull, at the head of all his females, the bull, who conquers and disables all his rivals, who dashes to the ground and tramples underfoot whatever provokes his anger and whom even the lion fears to attack ! And in the days of old, in the days of the Romans . . . "

He comes to a stop. The Russian, fork in hand, waits before resuming his work on the litter he is clearing. The old Barine still has something to say—there is something else on the tip of his tongue. But the flow of words seems suddenly to have left the surface and to be finding its way along subterraneous channels. He nods his head in little jerks but his lips remain closed.

PART III

SPRING

I

THE SAP has not yet begun to rise. The forest is still mistrustful. It is not to be wheedled by a few caresses of the sun. The roots have not yet taken their fill of sleep. But it is possible that instead of slowly and lazily thawing into life, they may waken in a panic and with their myriad suckers set to work all together tugging at their pap of earth and water. There are not many days left in which to finish the year's thinning. The woodcutter is behindhand with his work. The cutting will have to be limited to the least promising stems. Nicholas verifies one by one the gashes with which last autumn he had marked the trees condemned to perish, and now proceeds to apportion his reprieves. He is always inclined to admit as valid any reason for letting a fine stripling oak or ash remain standing—although the forest is a rough and hardy people, for ever on the verge of relapsing into chaos, and less injured by the unjust death of one innocent than by indulgence granted to a host of mediocre. For it is the free axe that makes the fine forest, and the vigilance of the woodcutter that keeps the woods healthy. The neighbours of a sickly or stunted tree conquer their share of light too easily. They relax, they spread. It is only in the struggle between the strongest and the slimmest that the virtue of each is exalted and the soaring of the rival tree-tops excited to its boldest heights.

"And look!" says Nicholas to the woodcutter. "We should have made a blunder in taking away this one. When the woods were cut eighteen years ago, we must have foreseen that these birches would have to go, but that we should keep the oak; and when we come back again in eighteen years' time, we shall have to cut not this one but the other on the left, whose foot is not so good."

The old woodcutter comes up and looks at the tree,

shaking his head. He passes his hand over the bark. Come a very severe winter and it's not at all so sure it won't be bitten by the frost. We shall see. . . .

(The life of the farm breathes slowly, its respiration rising and falling with the rise and fall of the year. Each piece of work is left and resumed every twelve months. Only a newcomer like Ivanoff sometimes fails to catch the rhythm, goes too slowly or too quickly, for he had not been long enough familiar with the land to take into account the character of its minutest parcel, to calculate exactly the humour of cattle, grass, manure. But the dial that measures the growth of the forest is vaster, the turn of its hand slower. A year for its inhabitants is only a narrow ring of sap-wood, invisible underneath the bark, and fifty succeeding rings signify no more than the youth of an oak-tree.)

" Yes," mutters the old man, " at the next cutting, we shall see. . . ."

His face is sulky. But it is not the thought of that distant tryst that will bring a woodcutter back to the same spot—another woodcutter than he—that darkens it. He grumbles because this tree and that tree are to be taken from him—every stem in the place that is at all straight and good-looking ; and how can he make his wood piles exactly equal and square, if he is reduced to nothing but crooked stumps ? But Mr. Nicholas, as usual, is wool-gathering.

Nicholas thinks he gives all his attention to his work, but his fits of absent-mindedness escape no one. It's his way, say some ; the worries he has, whispers others. For there have been rumours abroad lately, though they are difficult to specify. They flutter round Saint Saturnin without anybody in the house having so far heard them.

When someone told Comte Lemercier that Mr. Colombe's car had been seen outside the door of an individual of the name of Cibar, he shrugged his shoulders and guaranteed that never, in any circumstances, could a member of a

family he esteemed so highly, have had anything to do with such a disreputable fellow. . . . When it became known that negotiations were going on to set a wretched little local paper on its legs again, people cried out against the fraudulent dodges that enable a dishonest agent, in spite of scandals and law-suits, to carry on his crooked dealings eternally. . . . When certain remarks, let drop by one of Cibar's clerks in a café, were reported at the Prefecture, they excited at first nothing but laughter. But when the worthy solicitor of Variville, Maître Ramelle, thinking to deal a disloyal rival his death-blow, sent him a bill of exchange, and had it duly honoured, he stopped making jokes and pricked up his ears.

A certain amount of chance was needed to bring the tales to a head. Several weeks were needed before people stopped rejecting them forthwith because of their unlikelihood. Saint Saturnin enjoys such an unblemished reputation that it presents an almost impregnable front to suspicion. Saint Saturnin, its eyes turned elsewhere, has always held aloof from local competition ; its disinterestedness commands respect but is disconcerting. The motives of its enthusiasm or its indignations, of its charity or its indifference, are hard to grasp. A highly distinguished family, think the neighbours, which has been settled among us for more than a century, but which has never quite become one of us. The world of affairs ! The great world where one meets queer people, where the best rubs shoulders with the worst, where dazzling fortunes are made, but also where they sometimes come to scandalous ruin. True, whatever we undertake down here, the Colombes, with their connections in Paris, must be appealed to ; but as to foreseeing what they may take it into their heads to do. . . . You remember once. . . . And in the matter of the schools. . . . And what a wild man of the woods Nicholas is ! . . . Original ! Very original ! And no friends. . . . Would you be excessively surprised to hear that for all his looking as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth . . . ?

The alarm has been given by an accidental meeting with an old neighbour on the boundary of their two estates. M. Lamorinière is not able to resist a sly insinuation while complimenting Nicholas on the honesty of his employés.

" More honest than certain other people you put your trust in. But perhaps I'm being indiscreet."

Nicholas seems not to understand the point of this remark, nor his interlocutor the necessity of affecting such excessive denseness.

" Come, come, my dear fellow, if he hadn't been helped by Saint Saturnin would Cibar have been able to . . . ? "

This time it is obvious that Nicholas is completely at sea.

" Of course, I don't doubt you for a second, but you must admit that appearances . . . For unless the scoundrel has committed a forgery, the letter he claims to have in his possession . . ."

" A letter ? "

" Tut, tut ! I see the rascal has been lying again."

" But what kind of a letter ? "

" Signed Colombe—so he gives out. Compliments, encouragements—more perhaps. So you can imagine our perplexity. . . . For it was obviously absurd to suppose your brother—who is so rarely here, or your dear father, who is the soul of moderation and prudence . . ."

" While I . . . ? "

" No, no, my dear Nicholas. Not for a moment ! Everybody knows you don't take the slightest interest in politics. That's why people have been so puzzled by this story. I shall take particular pleasure in contradicting it—and as publicly as possible."

Nicholas thanks him effusively.

" You will be doing me an immense service."

But no sooner has he seen his neighbour go off alongside the ditch that separates their woods, than he suddenly changes his mind and runs after him.

" I'll enquire into the matter myself," he stutters. " On reflection, I think it will be better."

He feels he is blushing under the old gentleman's piercing glance—blushing unconscionably for a man of his age.

" If this fellow Cibar isn't put on his guard, don't you think it may be easier for me to catch him out . . . ? "

His neighbour, standing there on a tuft of primroses, becomes more polite than ever.

" Just as you like, my dear Nicholas, just as you like."

" I'm red all over," thinks Nicholas, " and yet I can't say . . ."

And the old gentleman goes away repeating :

" Just as you like, just as you like."

II

After knocking in vain, Nicholas opens the door of his sister's room. It looks empty, but as he turns round, he sees Jourdaine on her knees in front of an open trunk.

" Are you going away ? "

She starts.

" You frightened me ! . . . No, I'm not going away."

As he looks in astonishment at the open drawers and all the things scattered about :

" I hadn't unpacked this trunk before," she murmurs. " I had kept on hoping that perhaps . . . But there's no question of leaving now."

And suddenly raising her face to Nicholas's :

" It's begun again," she says. " She has come to say that she can't stay any longer."

Her brother raps out his bad temper in an oath—followed by another—and another.

" And of course for the same reasons ? "

" Yes, the same."

" Offer of marriage included ? "

" I don't know. Ask her yourself if you want to. The confidences of the last were enough for me. I haven't the courage now to invent excuses, to stammer, to apologise humbly."

" Charming ! " grumbles her brother. " And if we engage a third, it'll be the same thing . . . until we get one we shan't be able to get rid of."

" But Nick," she cries, " did they hide the truth from us ? Have you men been deceiving us as usual ? For you always back each other up when it's a matter of covering up certain things. Was there anything that would have made it possible to imagine . . . ? "

"Mother," he answers, "is the only person who could have told us that. Towards the end, as you see, she had become uneasy; but rather by divination, I think, than for any real reasons. No, I've thought it over—carefully. There wasn't a sign of anything suspicious."

"But all these abominable obsessions that are coming to the surface now—they must have been hidden somewhere."

"As they are hidden in us all."

Then he slides into one of his favourite theories:

"One often comes to grief, you see, because one doesn't give the beast in one a big enough share; and I'm inclined to think that was where he went wrong. It's a very difficult business keeping the beast in order. One has to be very cunning with it. Not give it too much—but not too little either. Not drive it to despair—else it revenges itself."

A little smile passes over Jourdaine's lowered face. Artful Nicholas! Man of many wiles! But she is not convinced by his specious reasoning.

"If there was nothing in the past," she answers, "then what we see isn't even the beast, as you say. He seems to me like a man who has tumbled into a crevasse. And instead of staying near him and encouraging and helping him, we abandon him to his misfortune."

Kneeling there on the red tiled floor, Jourdaine certainly doesn't look as if she were lecturing her brother. But Nicholas defends himself as if he were being attacked.

"I've tried, my dear, I've tried. It's not easy. For years I've been on the defensive. For years we haven't exchanged a word that was worth while. It wasn't too apparent because of the façade; but when the façade fell . . . I used to say to myself that it was getting worse every day—that it was absurd to drift into this state of war. I racked my brains. Well, do you know the only thing that was ever successful? With a man of his intelligence! Such a kind, devoted father! One day when I couldn't think of anything whatever to

say, I suddenly had an idea : ' I've had a calf born this morning,' I said, '—a pedigree animal—and I want you to choose me a name for it.' He looked at me as he must have looked when I was three years old, with smiling eyes and a sweet affectionate expression. ' It's a long time,' he said, ' since you've given me such pleasure. I'm very much touched—very much.' So that for an hour on end we solemnly discussed names. That calf had managed to cross the space that separates us, when there is nothing else that can—not my children, nor old times, nor mother's memory. Why ? Why that calf ? "

Picking up a box she has dropped :

" Perhaps we aren't patient enough," she whispers.

And as he protests :

" But Nick," she says, " don't you think that giving us our bottles and washing us and bringing us up needed more perseverance than anything we give in exchange ? "

At sight of his sister's despondency Nicholas had almost resolved to say nothing about his fresh anxieties this evening, but he dislikes being put in the wrong.

" In the meantime," says he, " the whole neighbourhood is accusing me of underhand dealings with that scoundrel Cibar, and I can't even give them the lie publicly. Old Lamorinière told me about it and he still thinks I'm the guilty one, because I didn't say with my hand on my heart, ' It's not I, it's my lunatic of a father ! ' In spite of my not being a patient son, I couldn't get the words out. And besides he would have answered, ' When people have old men in the family who go off their heads, they look after them.' "

He gives an impatient kick to a cushion that is lying on the ground :

" I've already made enquiries. It's a fact that Father once drove to see Cibar in the car. Richard thinks it was in January. I hurried off to Maître Ramelle's. As you may suppose, he had heard all the rumours, and was anxious

and irritated, and ready to accuse me too ; which proves at any rate that we've kept up appearances and that we haven't disowned our father, since people can't tell the difference between him and us. It seems that Cibar has got a letter with some kind of promise in it. What exactly can Father have promised him ? Nobody knows. At any rate, a certain sum of money has been paid. There's talk of a gigantic co-operative society or some scheme of that kind. Just what's necessary to discredit for ever the excellent ideas we've been trying for the last twenty years to knock into people's heads down here . . . and to put Cibar in a position to buy up Saint Saturnin, when we're reduced to selling it."

Jourdaine, sitting on the floor, answers not a word.

"At any rate we've got an ally in Ramelle who takes our interests seriously to heart. He's terrified at the risks we're running. You know the awe-struck tone in which lawyers pronounce certain words like 'settlements' or 'remainder' as other people say 'Holy Sacrament' or 'Sacred Heart.' I wasn't feeling very cheerful, I assure you, but all the same, it was all I could do to prevent myself going off into a fit of laughter. Fortunately, Ramelle didn't notice anything, poor fellow, for he's seriously upset. If Saint Saturnin is threatened with ruin, what is left for him to put his trust in ? We are the citadel to which his eyes have been turned ever since he entered the office as an articled clerk. If we were to collapse it would be the end of the world. He at once began planning measures of defence—proofs, witnesses, all sorts of preparations in view of getting an order in lunacy. He enquired about our domestic staff, and I must say he astounded me. 'You've a new gardener, haven't you ? Are you sure of him ? And that maid, what's her name, Babet ? She must be the cousin of the man who keeps the *Café* at Saint Fiacre . . . rather shady in his methods at the last elections.' Women terrify him like so many devils. He already has a vision of Cibar's taking advantage of our first small mistake and holding us at his

mercy. The fact is that with a rogue of that kind our position may become untenable. . . . Has he had the cheek to come here, I wonder? A big fellow—rather red in the face—with a square beard. You haven't seen anything? Nothing?"

III

SUMMONED by an imperious bell, Babet has hastened to the old gentleman's room. He is on his feet with an agonised expression of countenance.

" My coat," says he ; " where's my coat ? "

" I took it down to brush, Sir."

" But I forbade you to ! . . . Bring it back at once ! At once ! The waistcoat too ! "

The maid, her conscience at ease, goes downstairs in no particular hurry, fetches the coat and brings it back. She finds William Colombe standing impatiently at the door of his room.

" Give it here ! "

He seizes the coat, clutches it to him and looks the servant up and down.

" You can go now," he says.

And it is not till he hears a door shut in the distance that he feverishly searches the waistcoat pockets. The key is there ! But there has been time enough perhaps to take an impression of it. . . . Then he goes back into his room, opens his writing desk, takes up a number of pages from under the blotter where they had been carefully hidden, and re-reads them before locking them up again.

To be kept. Instructions drawn up by me, William Colombe. Important. Reflections of a Life-time. To serve for the confusion of Fools and Cowards.

The Harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few. A man conscious of the greatness of his Mission ceases to be responsible to his family in order to become so to Humanity. Though his heart bleed, the hour has struck for him to cast aside his private affections and soar above them.

No voice but Nature's own is great enough to be his counsellor.

Listen not to the Voice of Blood, for Genius is universally derided by its nearest and dearest. No man is Prophet in his own country. Oh, unfathomable suffering!

Hideous and cruel cunning! None such is recorded in the Annals of History. Devilish refinement of torture invented by the children to break their Father's courage. They attempt to convince him he has fallen into senile decay—not by saying so outright—that would too obviously betray their intentions. They use circuitous methods. They attempt slow poison. Slow poisons have always been used by the Weak, when humiliated by the spectacle of Strength. Beware of Poison. The tragic fate of the Strong is that they must beware of everything—even of the food that is put before them. This is the Calvary of the man who endeavours to climb to ever loftier heights. Poisonous mushrooms are the means most often used against bold Spirits. Examples in Roman history. Symptoms of poisoning from mushroom alkaloids only declare themselves when it is too late for antidotes to take effect. A few fragments of dried amanite are sufficient to cause death. Three kinds of deadly mushrooms abound in our woods. My eyes have been opened. How often a post-mortem would reveal unsuspected crimes! (Deposit strict injunctions as to this in safe hands.)

The Man marked out for great things gives proof, even in the smallest, of his Indomitable Will. No prejudices stop him. He considers it his duty to indulge his desires, in order to show he is superior to fear and hereditary scruples, and in order to train himself to vanquish obstacles.

Conservatives imagine that the progress of Civilisation consists in minute adjustments. I will show them what radical reforms a vigorous mind would carry out, if only it had the means of overcoming resistance. It is a seminarist's dream to think he can change the world without first having made himself master of it. Examples: Cæsar, etc. Ad augusta per angusta. *Posterity has always*

justified the first acts by which Reformers have assured themselves the means of triumphing. Let not the scruples of the ermine stop you. Traverse the mire as a Supreme Duty.

The strong Man has no friends for none is prophet in his own country. He lives in terrible solitude. He is sometimes reduced to seeking allies even in the enemies' camp. My thanks are due to those who, owing me nothing, forgot their prejudices to lend me an attentive ear. Amongst those who are supposed to be my equals, I have met only with slavish spirits (Nicholas, eunuch !), but my courage saved me as soon as I shook myself free from the chains of my family. I was on the road to great things in my youth. People imagine my life has been crowned with success and that all I aimed at was my family's prosperity. But I am worth more than that. And sooner or later it must be recognised. For fifty years I have been a victim, sacrificed to their happiness. Fate gave me back my liberty at the moment I was ripe for using it.

Unfathomable suffering ! A woman I was going to make the partner of my schemes has basely betrayed me and stabbed me to the heart. But nothing shall bend or break my courage.

The old man sits motionless. His shoulders are bowed. But even in the solitude of his chamber and when no eye sees him, the brave man holds firm in the face of sorrow. With a great effort, William Colombe raises his head, folds the pages and locks them in a drawer.

IV

"BUT, MONSIEUR NICHOLAS," says the builder, "this house, as you know very well, is built from cellar to roof of materials that will last for centuries. There's nothing the cleverest builder in the world could do to it but botch and bungle. I have built a few good houses in my day and altered a good many more, but I've never knocked a place to pieces for the mere pleasure of it."

His eyes—the eyes of a connoisseur and old friend—travel round Nicholas's study, from the cornice to the casements, from the ceiling to the skirting-boards.

"Wherever one looks, it's good stuff. This parquet floor we're standing on—it's plain enough if you like—a pattern they went in for about 1850; but not a board of it has budged. It's as smooth and well joined as if it were marble."

And yet, as Nicholas still seems to have some queer kind of idea in his head, Mr. Foulque is ready to oblige.

"That's what I say, but if you really insist, we'll go and look at the roof."

At the foot of the stairs, he stops again.

"And here, look at the tiling of your hall. It was I who restored the part over there near the door, where it was worn. It's laid on a bed of pink cement which old Picard (not our Picard's father but his grandfather) used to make out of crushed brick. The colour's a signature. Whenever I meet with it I recognise the artist—and I know there'll be chisels broken if I have to cut into his work."

On the landing of the second floor, he places the ladder, goes up and opens the trap-door.

"Look out for spiders' webs!"

With its forest of timber, its king-posts, its spans, the under roof has the look of a rustic church—the same bareness, the

same deserted appearance, the same dim light. Involuntarily, worthy Mr. Foulque lowers his voice a little :

" We all know it's a fine bit of roofing, but every time one sees it, one's astonished afresh."

He goes up to one of the great rafters and lays the flat of his hand on it with the gesture of a man stroking a horse's neck—half slap, half caress.

" Look at these trusses—like cabinet-maker's work ! Not a strut, not a stay that's so much as a quarter of an inch out ! Stand here by this tie-beam and look at those edges ; not one careless stroke of the axe ; not the breadth of a finger-nail that isn't heart of oak. If it was really General Colombe who saw to this work, I must say I shouldn't have cared to be one of his foot-soldiers, for he must have been a regular martinet in matters of alignment and drill."

He laughs but he feels that Nicholas is still pre-occupied.

" I said as much to Mr. William ; with all the care in the world, how would it be possible to take down those trusses without breaking the tenons ? But what he wants is to alter the whole thing from top to bottom. In that case there'll be precious little of it left—nothing usable beyond a few fragments. What kind of shoddy materials should I have to employ, I ask you, to replace all that—even regardless of expense—even if I took only the very choicest pieces from the whole lot ? When you've got beams and rafters that Rothschild himself couldn't get nowadays for love or money, why should you go and make a roof of deal ? I've made roof upon roof in the village out of good Baltic timber, but it's not worth while belonging to Saint Saturnin if you're going to build a house like Crétet's or old Jules'."

The pleading continues all the way downstairs, but it's not till thay are back in the study behind closed doors that Nicholas starts defending his bad cause against all these eloquent arguments.

They have put their father off for as long as they could, but he has already found the address of another contractor who would be only too delighted to undertake this absurd

job of pulling down a house and building it up again. In order to save it, a sacrifice must be made. Mere plans and estimates are no longer enough to satisfy Mr. Colombe's feverish activity. He has obstinately set his heart on enlarging the two projecting wings so as to form a courtyard on a huge scale, utterly out of proportion with the style of living at Saint Saturnin. The defenders must need capitulate—a stratagem of war—a cunning pretence of treachery—though no one can say which side will be the dupe. For however cautious they are, Saint Saturnin will be the stake in a game of chance they can only hope to win with the help of a great many accomplices. And Foulque, excellent fellow that he is, with his bluff, straightforward ways, does not seem at all the kind of man to enjoy the little duplicities of a part, which, after all, nothing obliges him to play.

For it is he who will have to organise the repeated delays, the absence of workmen, the shortage of materials, which may perhaps enable them to go on for an indefinite time digging foundations and only pretending to start work on an upper floor. It is he who will, they hope, so arrange things that an old man who is rather shaky on his legs will find it impossible to visit the works and see what is being done. It is he who will be harried with constant demands and complaints and involved in inextricable difficulties.

When Nicholas makes a tour of the house, ruminating his plans, what seems to him his easiest course is to simulate extensive alterations by sacrificing the roof of his own wing. This will be the least disastrous way of indulging his father's dreams. But when, as just now, he comes close to the inmost structure of the beloved building—so well-knit, so well-timbered, so admirably adapted to its purpose—he bursts into a sweat of indignation. If something must absolutely be done, let the outside terraces be dug up, and no more. The excavations may perhaps be used later on for storing fodder.

He puts forward a few cautious suggestions as if they had just come into his head. Foulque's first reactions are not

unexpected. How will he get his workmen to understand? How will he manage in such a hornets' nest?

"But surely, Mr. Nicholas, there are laws to prevent a man who is getting weak in the head from committing follies? When old Mr. Bélière . . ."

Nicholas tries to explain that such help will take time to get and may very likely arrive too late. What details one has to go into and how difficult it is, in dealing with a man full of countrified good sense like Foulque, to keep up this pretence of lordly indifference to any kind of extravagance!

"And if we manage," says Foulque, "to gain two months or two months and a half, what will happen next?"

Who knows where we shall be in two months' time? Something may turn up. . . . Is it for the sake of selling his consent a trifle dearer that the fellow pretends to have so little imagination? Yes, good Heavens! anything may happen between this and then! Let's say, for instance, a change of whim in an unbalanced mind—yes, a change of whim, Mr. Foulque.

The contractor nods his head without saying either yes or no. *He* can't speak straight out either; and if this folly must be perpetrated, he doesn't say how heart-broken he would be to see a rival introduced for the purpose into his own little domain of Saint Saturnin. . . . In order not to be obliged to make a decision on the spot, he assures Nicholas he will do his best, looks at his watch and sees it is late. It will not be easy to find a way, but he will try, he will reflect.

Nicholas, too, reflects as the evening closes in, and his thoughts circle round and round the same spot. Those armchairs are his; that ridiculous little table, with its Renaissance legs, bought Heaven knows where or when—a present perhaps—is his; even those absurd curtains made of some stuff he has never taken the trouble to look at—it would need a revolution to threaten his right to *them*. But the fine old parquet floor, laid down by his great-grandmother at the end of her life for the benefit of future generations—that floor that makes part of a house he has been taught for the

last twenty years to look upon as his own—hold hard ! The soles of his boots, yes ; but between their nails and the oak boards lies an inviolable frontier. " And yet," he thinks, " my boots might belong to anyone who bought them. And my foot, after all, is it mine ? I didn't make it and I might live without it. And this two franc bit in my waistcoat pocket will travel into other pockets. But the curtains belong to me (that's the only thing, in fact, that's certain) with their quaint bands and their foolish little fringes."

Suddenly, as if someone had been jeering at him for the last quarter of an hour, he bursts out in a fury at his own sophistication.

" And I, who never asked a thing—never the smallest favour ! I, who never wanted their Saint Saturnin ! "

He walks up and down the room growling :

" Ah, I've managed my affairs nicely ! Graciously tolerated in a place I may be dismissed from at any time, without so much as a day's notice ! Just, ' What are you doing here ? Be off with you ! ' It'll be a wonder if I'm allowed to keep my tractors and my livestock. ' Can you prove that cow's yours ? . . . Doubtful, doubtful . . . A written proof ? ' . . . Idiot ! Fatuous fool ! Double-dyed ass ! "

And if he is talking to himself like a lunatic, what does he care ? On the contrary, would to Heaven there was somebody there with his ear glued to the key-hole !

" For they aren't going to suppose, are they, that I'm here for my own pleasure—neither fish, flesh, nor good red herring—slaving like a navvy, and yet obliged to keep up appearances and live like a gentleman and support their fine established order of things ? And why have I led this dog's life, when at twenty-five I was keen enough to have done anything, gone anywhere ! When I might have started something new with men to my own liking, men with some guts in them, instead of these sluggish brutes I have under me here. I could have worked myself to the bone—for I love to be hard with the earth—and have gone on the loose when I chose—*cazzo di Christo*—fit to blow all their bloody old

respectable show to kingdom come. But out they came with their stock of touching arguments : ' Without you, my boy, what will become of Saint Saturnin ? Don't cause us such unhappiness. It isn't a gipsies' camping ground. The sacrifices of three generations would be wasted if the work didn't go on. . . .' And so forth and so on. And I gave in, if you please, with the meekness of an ox, with the patience of an ass. And now that I'm turned forty-two : ' No, my friend, that was all a mistake ! ' Curse it all ! It's not playing the game. Here am I, past my first youth and saddled with two children—and I haven't got ten years before me now to spend pioneering in Morocco. . . . Do they expect me to go on my knees to them ? It's humiliating enough as it is to be at the beck and call of a senile old man and his freaks, to dance attendance on him as if he were the Pope of Rome. What's the Holy Father thinking ? What's he saying ? Did he speak or did he retch ? . . . It would be less grovelling to declare open war. Only, you'll see, there'll be old Louis coming along as cool as a cucumber—not that his coolness costs him much—' Hullo ! Hullo ! What's all this ? There's no need for panic. The situation isn't as bad as all that ! ' . . . And what about the house that's going to be made uninhabitable—it's too big as it is already—almost insolently big, but at any rate it had the excuse of age, and old habits and the mellowness of time. But if now it's got to be dressed up like a rich man's fine new mansion, let it go to hell, it and its work of three generations ! I'd rather set fire to it at once and have done with it. And then at any rate, I could plant fruit-trees along any walls that were left."

The door of the room opens slowly as if it were being pushed by a dog. A little chirruping of voices is heard and then stops. In the gathering darkness Nicholas now sits motionless. But the old established customs of the house are not going to be interfered with because he has got a fit of eloquence. The light is turned up and the children rush in

as they are entitled to do at this hour—Lise and Jacquou, followed by the small Willy—all three dressed in warm, woollen pyjamas, and washed and brushed for dinner.

"You were hiding, so as to frighten us," says Jacquou, who is afraid of the dark.

"And so as not to tell us a story," adds Lise.

Nicholas turns a deaf ear.

"All right. Take a book now and sit still."

But the children too have their tactics. They have settled themselves on the divan.

"What are you going to tell us ?"

As a rule there now follows a trial of skill. Nicholas pretends to be telling a fairy-story and tries to slip something instructive into it, such as an episode from French history or an object lesson, while the children, at the first whiff of the schoolroom, protest vehemently.

"A story about Saint Saturnin !"

"But you know them all by heart, and you're getting too big !"

"Willy doesn't know them," says Lise, "and he's still so silly !"

The calumniated one says nothing. He is accustomed to injustice, and besides he realises perfectly the advantages it may bring on this occasion.

"And besides Aunt Reine's coming to take him away ! . . . He doesn't even know the story of Froggy Crag !"

Every remarkable or curious spot—hollow tree, dark hole, sluice or rabbit-warren has its own legend, invented in the course of one of the children's illnesses and continually improved upon in the telling. Nicholas ends by giving in :

"Craig's home was in the little tank at the end of the kitchen-garden, just on a level with the water, where there's a brick missing. . . ."

Lise interrupts :

"Was it before or after the snail sacrificed himself to stop up the pipe ?"

" Before. Crag was so proud that he wouldn't allow the other frogs to open their mouths in his presence. . . ."

And the story goes on to its well-known climax, when the presumptuous creature, having climbed to the top of an oak-tree, tries to silence the thunder by his croakings, and perishes, struck by lightning.

" We have shown him the oak that was struck," says Jacquou.

But Willy's apathy disappoints the other two. Lise tries to put a good face on it :

" Oh, well, he doesn't know all the places as we do."

And without attempting to linger as she usually does, she runs off with the two little boys after her.

But she returns a moment or two later, this time accompanied only by Jacquou. Her father is still sitting on the divan and still idly holding a paper-cutter. The children go up to the table, as they do every evening and, one after the other (Jacquou first, for he is the eldest) kiss their mother's photograph. This is a rite that dates back to a time before they can remember—the time of the catastrophe ; a peculiar instinctive shyness makes them keep it wrapped in mystery. They would never have profaned it before Willy. It is even probable that Miss Barge knows nothing about it. In earlier days, they used to say, " Good-night, Mummy ! " Then they whispered it. Then for the most part, they left off saying it altogether, as if there was too much ostentation even in a whisper. This time, however, Lise murmurs the words. She thinks her father must have heard them and climbs up to sit beside him. All the same she isn't a baby any longer who believes in Old Father Christmas ; and to excuse herself, she asks :

" Do you speak to her too ? "

" Why, yes," he replies.

She reflects and then goes on :

" Aloud ? "

" No, my darling, there's no need."

Jacquou comes and sits on the other side.

He would not have dared enter on such a conversation by himself, but now he ventures :

" Do you speak to her photograph ? "

" I think of her," answers Nicholas simply, ". . . and then she comes."

The children are a little frightened, but the wonder of it re-assures them.

" Is she here ? " asks Lise in a whisper.

" Yes, as we are thinking of her."

A moment goes by and then the little girl risks something very audacious :

" Tell her to sit on that chair."

Her father cannot help laughing and Jacquou shrugs his shoulders at the trivial matter-of-factness of girls.

" One talks to Jesus," he says.

Lise can't make up her mind whether she is outraged at being laughed at or whether she is going to laugh herself :

" In the first place, you know nothing about it," she cries. " You don't know whether Daddy talks to Jesus . . . Do you, Daddy ? "

" Not often," answers Nicholas a little too precipitately.

But he realises he is on the dangerous path that leads to theological dramas with Barge, and he goes on at once :

" I prefer talking to Mummy."

Then, to excuse his inadequacy a little :

" There are a great many people to talk to Jesus," he says, " but I am the only person who can tell Mummy about you. And Mummies are always unhappy unless they know all about their children. . . . And now, come along and give me a kiss and we'll go down to dinner."

V

From Jourdaine

My dearest boy,

The newspapers are speaking of renewed unrest among the hill tribes in Morocco. I pulled out the map at once. The news, as usual, is exasperatingly meagre and the names of places almost impossible to identify. I think I can make out, however, and your Uncle Nick agrees with me, that the trouble has not yet reached your mountains. But it may spread with the swiftness of a man on horseback, and no doubt you have already received your orders.

To say that all the thoughts that crowded into my heart were sensible, would be to make myself out more of a Roman matron than I am. But one can only be held responsible for the feelings that one shows, and I don't think I gave myself away much—except, perhaps, to the woman at the station bookstall, who may have been astonished to see me come two days running and buy all the papers she had for sale—including the reddest of the red. When I read the papers aloud to your grandfather I carefully skip the column likely to have telegrams from Morocco ; he never misses an opportunity of girding at me over your choice of a career ; and really, under the stress of this news, I shouldn't have had strength to defend myself for my share of responsibility in the matter—either against other people or myself.

And yet—and yet ! When I think of that bad time in London after you had left the lycée—the time of my terrors—the time when I was so anxious (absurdly so, I know, but still mortally) about your idleness, and the company you kept, and the danger you were in (or so thought your cowardly mother) of being seized with giddiness at the top of a terribly precipitous slope . . . at that time, what would I not have given for you to have been anywhere but in that poisonous town ? And no doubt because it is always wrapped in the fogs of its Thames, I dreamt of heights, glaciers, sun. Such places, I knew, of course, were badly situated on the map, but you would live in them, I thought, happily and proudly ; you would find rough, adventurous

work to do, demanding energy and tact. And of course you would be adored by everyone—a little brusque, perhaps, but just, persevering, master of yourself, as a young leader must be who is to become master of others. . . . And now this dream, in which I did not dare believe, has really come true because you chose the path I am blamed for letting you take. Only yesterday it all seemed so beautiful, and perhaps it is still so ; the smoke is still rising peacefully above your shelter, as it does in the little photograph, and nothing has gone wrong except in the newspapers, which will *mix up the Arab names.*

Unfortunately I have something more serious to confess than these foolish fancies. This month I shan't be able to send you the usual sum of money for you to distribute among the sick men of your detachment—nor perhaps next month either. If you have anything left, save it up for very urgent cases, for at the rate at which things are going here, no one can tell what one mayn't be faced with next.

The Cibar creature whom your grandfather used to visit at first in the utmost secrecy, is now received here openly. Yesterday I was told the man was here. I meant to go through the room to have a look at him, but they had locked the door. What can they be plotting? People say Cibar is renting business premises right and left in the best situations. The shopkeepers are uneasy—afraid of some kind of underhand competition, and the respectable old conservatives are still more agitated, for they are convinced that at the bottom of all this stir there must be some sinister political designs. They feel obliged, poor things, to club together, to take their gold and silver out of their money-bags in order to start a Press campaign and prove to the neighbourhood that they don't mean to let themselves be terrorised. You may imagine they won't forgive us *in a hurry. Your Uncle Nick stands firm against all these growlings. He attends a public meeting every now and then to show he has a good conscience and is not afraid of the daylight ; but the rest of the time, he buries himself in his hole and has turned so silent that you wouldn't know him for the easy, happy fellow he used to be.*

The lawyers don't know what to do. Cibar has taken out his leases in the name of a legally constituted society. There is no means of proving that the funds come from here, and great care has obviously been taken to cover up all trace of any payments. Maître Ramelle is

diligently collecting proofs of little extravagances that are hardly worth a smile, and we are almost ashamed he should seize upon them so eagerly ; but he hasn't much to go upon so far. He is on his guard, for he knows the enemy will spare him no sort of pettifogging chicanery.

In the meantime your grandfather's restlessness goes on increasing ; he is continually giving orders and countermanding them, changing his menus and his times for going out. The doctors prescribe sedatives, but they leave no doubt that this feverish agitation is bound to get worse. So that every day we sink deeper and deeper into the bog.

VI

"I NEVER expected," Nick had said yesterday to his sister, "that I should have felt so delighted at the thought of Reine's arrival. You'll see that those little signs of maturity she developed when she was feeling anxious for her boy, will have disappeared. For twenty-four hours, we shall think ourselves in an earthly Paradise of innocence. How refreshing!"

To-day it is Jourdaine's turn; she passes through the dairy for the mere pleasure of saying to Nicholas, who is overhauling his separator:

"To-morrow's a holiday. For a whole long day we must try and forget Saint Saturnin, and as it won't be easy, you had better begin practising at once. How delicious your dairy smells!"

"We'll try," says he, "only to speak of pleasant things. Fortunately she'll be thinking of nothing but the children and their clothes and their colds, so that we shan't have to talk much. Isn't my machinery beautifully polished, eh? To think that the madcap hasn't yet got a single white hair!"

Jourdaine takes a turn among the tin cans and shining pails.

"Not such a madcap as you think. Her heart's all neatly arranged—arranged once for all. There's Louis's share and the children's share. And you have your little corner and I have mine. One never gains much ground, but then one never loses any either. It's wonderfully restful. I hope the cream cheese will be just as she has decided she likes it."

"And if only we have a real spring day! For we've forgotten to notice that the spring has come."

Neither the sun, nor the showers of white anemones in the hedges, nor the children's shouts and bouquets and chatter, have been wanting. But when Reine, on coming out of the house, catches sight of the big scaffolding poles round a corner of the wing, and the heaps of earth the workmen are shovelling from a trench, she is so indignant that explanations have to be gone into, which then necessitate others. And that is an end of happy resolutions. How inattentively she must have read her letters to be so much upset! It is true that as she never opens a book, she is unfamiliar with written words; she only understands what she sees.

At the same time William Colombe comes out of the front door. Reine, still a prey to her indignation, forces Jourdaine to go back.

"Please . . . Please . . . I shouldn't know what to say to him. . . . How changed he is! Heavens! How changed he is!"

They are more or less hidden by a bush.

"How he stoops! Yes, Jourdaine, or else you won't see it. How he drags his legs!"

The old man comes on slowly and awkwardly, leaning on his stick and cautiously feeling his way. On reaching a little heap of gravel, he raises one of his feet, hesitates, puts it down again. Will he be discouraged?

"Oh," sighs Jourdaine, "he's got over it."

"If only," says Reine crossly, "he could have a good fit of the gout!"

"But he never has gout. . . ."

"Or anything else that would keep him quiet. It's no good pretending, is it?"

Jourdaine makes no answer; but suddenly she can control herself no longer.

"There he is again," she bursts out, "going to scold the workmen, because there are only three of them when he ordered ten. I can't leave the poor things to get out of it by themselves."

Reine wishes she had never left Paris. But there is something of the amazon in her that is aroused by the scent of battle. A certain violence does not come altogether amiss to her. Once at a sanguinary bull-fight, she did not faint, as Louis prophesied ; she even wanted to see another one the next day. She knows she has more spunk than that poor Jourdaine, who is simply paralysed by respect. It is she who steps forward first :

" Father," she says boldly, " you're making a fine mess of Saint Saturnin. Tell the men to fill up those holes again as quickly as possible."

Contrary to her expectation, the old man smiles :

" I want the house to be worthy to receive you as you deserve, daughter," he answers with courtly gallantry.

" But there are too many rooms in it already."

He gives her a look which is both sly and jaunty :

" Too many perhaps for the old days. But why always hark back to the past. . . . You let me be . . . let me be. . . ."

" But you're surely not going to touch the walls, are you ? "

" There ! There ! Let me be—and give me your charming arm."

She obeys. Since a diversion had to be made—all right ! He is walking away from the workmen now. But something in his insistent courtesy makes her feel uncomfortable.

" You will invite all your young women friends," he goes on.

" But I haven't got any," she says, trying to hurry him towards the front door.

" That's a pity ! A pity ! "

She would like extremely to take her arm away, but he is leaning on it so hard that she is afraid he will fall.

" This is only a beginning. Before the end of a month, I want . . . But my architect is a red slug who ought to be squashed with a stamp of the heel. People always think these carroty fellows . . . Because François I. had red hair . . . As if that proved anything ! . . . Weaklings and

milksops! . . . '*La donna è mobile*' . . . Whose fault was that, pray?"

He mutters something more she can't understand and then says confidentially:

"I want to have room for twenty young women."

This time she draws away. She is still as easily scared as a young girl by anything the least ambiguous. If only he would fall down, the horrid old flirt!

"Help me up the steps," says her father-in-law.

"I must go and see to the children," she stammers. And as soon as Jourdaine comes up to relieve her, she runs away as fast as she can.

It is to be hoped he may not take it into his head to go back to the workmen, who are now no doubt partaking of one of those numerous snacks which Nicholas encourages by his liberality with the cider. Jourdaine helps the old man up the steps as hurriedly as she can. But William Colombe's mind ranges over more than one kingdom. He contemplates other horizons than these walls and trees—narrow limits that confine the gaze of those short-sighted little owls, his daughters! He knows of other springs than this sophisticated arrangement under his windows of three or four azaleas and a few dozen tulips.

On the last step he stops, regardless of his daughter's efforts to go on:

"You will send me the gardener, this afternoon," says he. "But mind he comes. It's very important."

It has been decided that Nicholas shall take advantage of this opportunity to lunch with his father and the two women, so that he may not appear to be accepting the position of the bad son in disgrace. But at the last moment he hesitates. The day has begun ill and seems to be continuing even more gloomily than usual. When he gets to the drawing-room door, he has half a mind to turn back, only he sees that Reine is on the point of doing the same thing.

At sight of his son, Mr. Colombe raises astonished eyes and offers the tips of his fingers with a muttered " Good morning, good morning."

But when Nicholas sits down as if he had no intention of leaving and even begins a would-be lively conversation with Reine, the old man cannot contain himself.

" Please ! " he cries, and his voice suddenly becomes imploring.

As all eyes turn in his direction, " Please ! " he repeats. " No, my boy, no ! "

His tone is that of a sick man afraid of being hurt and trying by his wails to prevent people from touching him. But no one seems to understand.

" Go away," he adds, almost timidly. " Please ! Go away ! "

" Do you mean you want me to leave the room ? " asks his son, only half understanding.

" Yes, yes. Please."

The blood rushes to Nicholas's face.

" In other words," he returns, " you don't wish to see me in your house ? "

" Don't argue," the old man moans. " Go away ! "

The women have no time to intervene before their brother has already risen.

" Very good," he says. " There'll be no need to tell me so twice."

And he flings out of the house, still sufficiently master of himself to refrain from slamming the door of the drawing-room too rudely ; it is only the hall-door that he shuts with a violent bang.

" You've no right to," cries Reine indignantly. " Call him back ! "

But the old man's obstinate face and Jourdaine's despondent gesture silence her. Since those whose business it is to resist let themselves be cowed by a pig-headed, wicked old madman, very good ! Let the family go to pieces for all she cares ! After all, their Saint Saturnin ! . . .

The two old setters, sopping and muddy after a rabbit hunt in the wet grass, have taken refuge under the dining-room table. They smell so unpleasant that Reine is on the point of putting down her napkin and leaving the room. Horrible old things ! Why doesn't someone do them the charity of shooting them ? Fortunately, it is not long before William Colombe rises, and after roughly rejecting an offer of company, makes his way to the garden. Reine's one idea now is to escape.

" He may come back. Oh, do let's go to your room."

And when they are on the second floor, sitting side by side on the sofa, with the door shut :

" How can you find strength," says she, " to endure such a life day after day ? "

" Strength ! Strength ! " murmurs Jourdaine. " When there's nothing to do but endure, strength, luckily, isn't needed."

Reine shakes her by the arm in exasperation.

" For heaven's sake," she cries, " stop being sublime for one moment ! "

She trembles after she has said it, but it seems as if this tiny fillip has been enough to bring down the last remnants of Jourdaine's pride ; for she doesn't protest, doesn't even smile, and goes on meekly as she has been told to :

" It gets more difficult every day. I have to get him up, dress him, put him to bed. He doesn't dare treat me to the outbursts of ill-temper with which he visits Babet and Jenny. If I tried to get them to help me, they'd both leave. I'm terrified lest they should go. But my authority's dwindling. He hopes to tire me out too. You see how he dismissed Nicholas just now. In a few weeks' time, it's I who will be told to leave Saint Saturnin."

" He's much fonder of you than of poor old Nick."

" Yes, but all the old grievances he has against Nick are perhaps less acute than those he has now against me : I

was the person to turn out Ninette, and let no one enter the house since then but prim old prudes."

"And suppose you took him at his word? Suppose you went away? . . . Yes, Jourdaine, don't look so terrified. . . . If you were to let him fend for himself for a bit, he might see perhaps how necessary you are to him."

"Why, my dear girl, before I came back, another Ninette or some Cibar or other would have got hold of him. He'd be in their clutches. You know the story of that old M. de Saint-Euloge who was kept shut up in the cellar by his nephews. They used to beat him to make him say he didn't want to see his children; and gave him salt water to drink if he didn't tell the magistrates he was perfectly happy!"

Reine persists:

"It's an intolerable life. I shall take you away with me to-morrow."

"He'd not be fit to be seen in a week's time."

"You could go backwards and forwards between here and London."

"I can't."

"Your husband needs you too."

"But I can't," cries Jourdaine, "I can't!" And suddenly her despair bursts out. "Oh, be quiet, do! Be quiet! Backwards and forwards! And where's the money to come from? Nick lent me five hundred francs the other day, but when shall I be able to pay him back? *He* may be in difficulties too from one day to the next. I do nothing but talk of my father, I seem to be thinking only of him. But in reality why do I cling on here? Why do I spy and lie and swallow humiliations?" Reine is amazed.

"How is it possible?" she asks.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking. His debts! His mistresses! It's not that at all. I admit he doesn't like economising, but who was it who was always urging us to live in a grand style? Who kept repeating, 'In your position you must keep up your country's prestige and do things well'? And then everything abruptly changes. It's the

suddenness of the change that does for us. As for me, I don't care. It's all one to me. But as regards my husband, I'm a partner who has broken faith, who has dragged him into a dangerous situation and suddenly left him stranded. That's why I must do what I can to extricate him. And the only thing I can do is to stop here, perched like a harpy, trying to defend a little pile of money they want to do us out of."

Vexation at having been reduced to such a confession brings the tears to her eyes.

"It's not the money you're defending, it's something else," retorts Reine, who dislikes useless bitterness.

"Nearly everyone defends their money for 'something else.' That's no excuse. And it doesn't alter the fact that instead of being a person of some importance, with a part to play in the world and certain qualities of one's own, as one had fondly imagined, one finds oneself reduced to being nothing at all but a banking account. That's the only point of my existence, and it's a hard thing to realise—very hard. . . ."

But Reine can bear it no longer.

"You're talking," she cries, "like a little girl who deserves to be smacked ! Yes, smacked, smacked ! You, they all admire and respect so. Then what ought to be said of me ? What am *I* good for ? Nothing whatever ! Nothing ! Just able to come it over Willy a little. Marianne puts me posers I don't know how to answer, and Laurette's head is full of things she won't speak of. I don't know whether I was blind before or whether everything went to pieces while I was away. Louis gets irritable over trifles. The truth is he was happier without me . . . I know what you're going to say. Maybe he's still as fond of me as ever, but he's a great deal fonder of spending his nights in the train."

Jourdaine takes her hands, protests, tries to stop her. If discouragement has set in there too, then the ground is rocking and ruin lies ahead. . . .

"The few moments of leisure," Reine goes on, "he used

to allow himself from time to time, I now see hang heavy on his hands. I don't even dare wish him to get free from the whirlpool. For us, such a turmoil would be unendurable, but it's when he's in the heart of it that he gets most peace. While I was away, he used to get an old secretary fellow to come and work with him during his free times. He stopped it when I came back. It's one more sacrifice for me, but it's a painful one—yes, a painful one. . . . The moment things slow down a bit he begins to brood. He suddenly says, 'It's Father who handed me over half the things I'm busy over. He regrets it. He'd like to take them back. I'm covered with his spoils, just as if I'd murdered him.' Or else he says, 'You see how quickly the finest intelligence may come to grief. I must make haste. I haven't many more years left.' The worst times are when he comes back from Saint Saturnin. Oh, when shall we be quit of it all ? "

Jourdaine makes a last effort to ward off the threat that is already on her sister-in-law's lips.

" If," she says, " we remain united, as we always have, and if no one gets discouraged . . ."

But Reine turns her head away and looks at the carpet.

" Darling," she murmurs, " . . . it's difficult to say. . . . I feel a coward. He would like to help you more. . . . He'll send you all the money you want, and if he could have guessed. . . . But he can't come down here himself much oftener. . . . For his own good, I ought to try and prevent him from coming at all. I'm ashamed to say so, but it would be lying to say anything else. . . . I don't know how to beg forgiveness. . . . But you do understand, don't you? You do understand ? "

Jourdaine is silent. What can she answer ? What hope is there of stopping this desertion, now the shame of confessing it has been swallowed ? But all the same, Reine needn't think she is going to leave to an accompaniment of cheers and waving handkerchiefs. Jourdaine tries to find some parting shaft, and finally says :

" Nicholas—he's fond of theories—pretends that it's the

men's business to make a family rise and prosper, but that it's the women's to keep it going. . . . The women, yes; but one woman all by herself . . . when everything is tottering. . . ."

Reine's eyelashes flutter. She humbly removes a few scraps of down that are coming through the silk of a cushion. She stammers excuses that are accepted without argument.

"No doubt, dear Reine, you are the judge. . . ."

Reine, at any rate, wants to devote the rest of this wasted afternoon to the poor old man downstairs. Is he really so dangerous? Aren't there other troubles in the world than these which the people here seem to make such a tragedy of?

When they go down, they are astonished by the silence. No one in the drawing-room, and the servants' quarters are deserted! They go out—nobody at the works either. But on the other side of the terrace, where the White Gates avenue begins, they see a group consisting of three workmen and the cook, who all seem to be looking at something in the avenue. A little further on is another group, the gardener, Mlle Cheu and Babet, looking also in the same direction. It is towards them that Jourdaine hurries. They whisper to each other when they see her coming, but no one goes to meet her.

"What's happening?"

No one seems anxious to answer. But Jenny points to the avenue and Jourdaine hears a twofold rhythmic sound.

"What's that sawing?"

The gardener finally grumbles out:

"They're sawing the trees of the avenue and Mr. Nicholas said we weren't to interfere!"

"Sawing the trees! . . ."

"But *I* won't give a hand to it anyway."

"Cutting down the trees, did you say? But why? Why?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Two feet from the ground, so that he may sit down just there."

"They offered to bring him a bench," says Jenny, "but it's the stump of the tree he must have and nothing else."

Reine and Jourdaine stand still, hesitating, as people hesitate to approach the scene of an accident. And they all listen for a moment in silence to the husky, flat sound of the saw cutting through the green wood.

"But didn't Mr. Nicholas try and do anything?"

"I started pretending," says the gardener, "I hadn't any saw strong enough for such a job, and then I hurried as fast as I could to warn Mr. Nicholas. 'I can't do anything to prevent it,' says he. Then one can't do anything to prevent murders and fires either, I suppose."

"Where is Mr. Nicholas?"

"I don't know, Ma'am. I should say he's gone off to the high meadows, as far as he can go. He don't much fancy the sight, most like. But I expect that even there . . ."

A loud crack interrupts him. They wait breathlessly. Then a crash of broken branches tells them that the proud head has fallen to the ground.

"The second!" says Jenny.

Jourdaine looking at the clump of trees, still only sparsely covered with foliage, suddenly perceives new spaces of sky between the branches. And now she doesn't walk, she runs. Reine and she get into the avenue at the same moment. What a gap! One of the farm-hands and the under-gardener are still holding the long saw. There, on the grass border of the path lie the two enormous corpses, one on the top of the other, their arms entangled; a broken twig still hangs swinging from a strip of bark on the second—last shivering sign of the giant's overthrow. Two elm-trees, more than a century old, phosphorescent with the green sparkle of young leaves barely unfolded and still in all their new-born freshness! The sap that fed them has not yet been drained by the fatal bleeding. The slow and stubborn creatures seem not yet to have understood; through the tangle of their broken limbs they still raise the ruined

remnants of their branches, where a hundred thousand little flames still quiver and rustle.

William Colombe is seated motionless on one of the stumps, as though inhaling the two centuries of life that have been sacrificed at his feet. Does he want a third slaughter to satisfy this April day's caprice?

The men with the saw retreat noiselessly step by step, trying to reach the other side of the avenue in the hopes of being able to make off before another execution is ordered. And when the old man turns his head, it is on the two women that his eyes light.

The seated man and the two sisters-in-law standing close together side by side, look at each other long in defiant silence, and no one can guess which of them will be the first to break it. It is the father, however, who succeeds in making his daughters lower their eyes. Then, with the same gallantry of manner he had affected in the morning, he addresses Reine:

" I have had a seat prepared for you, you see, in the most delightful place I could find. Try it. This is the only spot from which one can see the White Gates steeple—over there, in the gap between the two apple-trees."

She looks with horror at the stump and sees it is wet with oozing sap whose tears drip slowly down the bark.

" You don't like it?" he goes on. " You prefer a *bergère* upholstered with *petit point* to this magnificent tree felled on purpose for you, and the like of which has seldom been cut even for an empress."

Then, turning towards one of the prostrate trunks:

" I am sorry, my friend," he says, " the ladies will only condescend to rest their posterior charms on cushions of down."

Then, turning to Reine again:

" Shall we send for a cushion? Or perhaps you dislike this tree? Would you prefer the next?"

He calls the two men:

" The lady prefers the next tree."

"If you cut down the whole avenue . . ." she cries.

"Eighteen inches, instead of two feet, as it's for a lady. . . . The lady wishes to see it fall and a lady's wish is law. . . . What are you waiting for ?"

What is Reine to do ? She finds herself in the ridiculous position of a tragedy heroine condemned to see an innocent prince perish under her very eyes, if she refuses to yield to the caprice of a sanguinary old man. Yield she will not ! But yet the tree ! . . . Heroines extricate themselves at the last moment because they always have a pocket in their dress and a dagger in their pocket. But here what can be done ? . . . And suddenly she turns to the workmen :

"Give me the saw. Here, Jourdaine, take the other end. . . . He may cut down the next tree with a knife if he likes, he shan't have the saw. . . . Quick ! Quick !"

She hasn't time to see the smiles of the two men nor to hear what the old man is growling behind her. She drags her sister-in-law along with her at the end of the steel ribbon with its notches of formidable teeth.

"Don't answer if he calls ! Don't look behind you. . . . Good God ! All Saint Saturnin has collected over there. We shall have to go past them with this affair ! . . . Gently, gently ! . . . Don't let's run !"

It would be sheer insolence to risk meeting her father-in-law again. Willy's things are packed in ten minutes. But she can't leave without saying good-bye to Nicholas. Where can he be dawdling? If he delays another half-hour she will miss her train. Just as she has given up all hope, she hears him whistling under her window a tune he sometimes whistles (though he whistles rarely). She hurries to join him in the hall.

"I'm obliged to leave. . . . Jourdaine will explain. The day couldn't have ended worse."

He smiles disagreeably—mockingly.

"On the contrary, my dear Reine, better than one could have hoped !"

"When you see the poor trees . . ."

"They're the price of the day's work—the best we've had yet."

Then she thinks she notices a smell of brandy and understands why his eyes sparkle so oddly.

"Nick, where have you been?"

"Do you suppose I haven't had enough of being cooped up here all day long doing this beastly work? I'm not a saint yet—nor even a poor devil of a monk."

"Be quiet!" she says. "At this moment you look like your father."

She sees his countenance change:

"Like him! *I* like him! Reine, if you ever had the ill-luck to say that again, I believe . . . I really believe I should box your ears."

He is obviously not joking and his hands are trembling with anger.

"I won't say it," she answers calmly, "and I won't think it, if you don't. . . . How can you drink such horrid stuff?"

"I'm not as drunk as you think. . . ." he murmurs, and then adds:

"Forgive me, Reine, my dear, but I'm sick of it! . . . If only I could forget his existence for a few days! . . ."

VII

"A GOOD day," Nicholas had said. . . .

Yes, the young grass, after a week's rain, has set to work in the sunshine and each blade has diligently pushed its point upwards. And the cattle have been put out to graze, their hoofs have sunk with pleasure into the rich abundant pasture ; the fresh green has swollen their udders. And Maître Ramelle is overjoyed at being able to add another note to his file. " An avenue, the pride of an estate, which is itself one of the jewels of our district . . . "

The comments, running from door to door, spare not a single circumstance that can aggravate the case against the old Herod and his scandalous fancies : " Trees in full sap ! Wood worth one doesn't know how much the cubic foot left there to rot on the ground ! And all for what ? To see our White Gates church ! Who would have thought our church was as fine as that ? And Garain, who has been to look on the spot, says he couldn't get so much as a glimpse of it—except for the weather-cock on the steeple above the apple-trees, like a sparrow perched on a branch. Now he's begun, the old lunatic, you'll see, he'll be cutting down the apple-trees next ! "

But what Nicholas hasn't foreseen is that they go on to add :

" And aren't you surprised it was the ladies that had to come and carry off the saw, whilst Mr. Nicholas slunk away to his fields as if he was afraid someone was going to walk off with his young oats ? " And now at last the answer is whispered to a question that for years past has tormented the neighbours' curiosity. " Since he couldn't do anything to stop it, it's likely that nothing's been signed between them. Maybe he'll be master of Saint Saturnin some day, but meanwhile, you may take my word that it no more

belongs to him than it does to me or to that outlandish Russian of his he was hobnobbing with last night as if he'd been his born brother. He mustn't take us for such noodles as that, our respected mayor ! "

And does Nicholas reflect on the two or three glasses offered to a man who had passed his word to give up drinking ? " The only human being here," thinks he, " I can talk to without hypocrisy." And for Ivanoff too this day counts as one of the happiest of his time of exile. On his way back to the farm in the evening, he had stopped for a moment on a grassy upland bordered with hedges. Was it the mellow glow of the setting sun ? His face had lighted up with the smile of a child who dreams of Paradise and, " It's like the country round Kief ! " he had murmured with a melting heart. . . . But the rule it had required such an effort of courage to establish has been broken. He is a man who has tasted drink again—a man who has re-discovered the dangerous path that brings him to visions of his home . . . a man perhaps ruined for Nicholas. But who can tell what the future may have in store ? . . . For the present it is just a question of holding on till to-morrow—and then till the day after.

VIII

From Louis

My dear Nick,

You feel as if you were being swallowed up in a nightmare—while my impression, on the contrary, is that we may now begin to breathe. We can consider ourselves saved now that the problem is reduced at last to a conflict between reason and un-reason, and can be stated impersonally. In that case we are on solid ground again. Things become clear with an almost mathematical clearness. It is no longer a question of us three, our tastes and our comforts ; it is a question of putting a stop to absurdities, of preventing the scandalous triumph of a gang of swindlers. Our personal drama consists in the fact that there is still a strain of reason in Father that gives a kind of grandeur to his madness. We shall never really come out into the light of day until his last remnants of lucidity have been extinguished. But though this is a melancholy thing to have to recognise, I am not going to be led into considerations that would end in God's making us shoulder his own responsibilities. My metaphysics are disciplined just as my conduct is, and it's no business of mine to explain why it should be necessary for one generation to push another into the grave. To limit myself strictly to my own affairs, I say that I prefer fighting Father to judging him. It's more manly and more loyal. It restores one's liberty of mind and heart. The question now before us is how to keep going the main things to which Father devoted his life. To-morrow the whole concern will very likely seem old-fashioned and our system will pass like those that went before it—but in the meantime, I stick to it as Father did.

I have therefore taken the steps I spoke to you about. That was last week. The bigwig's secretary assured me that in case of necessity they would do their best to cut short the formalities. But I saw him again yesterday. He had been making enquiries unofficially and seemed a good deal more cautious. The fellow Cibar is not unknown ; he has sailed in the dirty waters of low-class journalism, and has a hold, it is said, over certain personages with skeletons in their cupboards. For my part, I admit I prefer an out-and-out scoundrel to a sham honest man.

I should like to be quit as easily of some other anxieties suggested to me by what is going on at Saint Saturnin. There are certain things which so far one hasn't much dwelt on, but which one must eventually make up one's mind to face, such as : the decay of our faculties, the fragility of feelings we thought eternal, the risk we run of suddenly going back on ourselves and destroying our life's work with our own hands. You know I'm not one to be very fond of confidences. When I make a mental review of all the numbers of men with whom I have had friendly relations, I can't think of one who wouldn't be amazed if I took it into my head to show him my private feelings. I am drawing up a few notes, and, no doubt, my dear boy, it is to you I shall one day show them. After that I shall feel easier.

I enclose a little something towards immediate expenses.

" Well," says Jourdaine, handing the letter back to her brother " it's a comfort to think that at least one of us is still firm on his legs."

Nicholas is fidgeting with his wedding ring, pulling it off and on with difficulty over his stiffened finger-joint.

" So you think that letter shows signs of firmness, do you ? "

" At any rate, he's not knuckling under—which is something."

Nicholas seems entirely taken up with his ring.

" When so many arguments are necessary," says he. . . . " And to speak of confidences ! . . . Louis ! . . . Do you hear ? Louis ! . . ."

" Well, Nick, happily for all of us, he has his career at any rate—and that's a marvellous support. He has built himself solid foundations and there's no danger of their giving way. . . . For goodness' sake, let your ring alone ! "

But Nicholas is absorbed in his own thoughts and will not abandon his pessimism even for the sake of being obliging.

" He's one of those animals who secrete a shell," says he. " Do you think a crab is necessarily less vulnerable than an eel ? "

IX

William Colombe's Notes

(In my inaugural address I must make a point of refusing gratitude.)

Keep gratitude, Gentlemen, for the great Inventors whose names are unknown—for him who gave us the first plough—for him who gave us fire. My name must not be put beside such Giants as those. And yet, if we are to measure action by the efforts it has cost (without drawing up soul-less American balance-sheets like Louis), you must think, Gentlemen, of the martyrdom of a man who dares not confide his plans for the public good even to a letter, who can only carry on his Work under cover of false names, who is obliged to have recourse to all the subterfuges miscreants make use of for their crooked manœuvres !

Twice I have found Jenny Viper behind my back when I was off my guard. My friends try to impress the necessity of prudence on a heart like mine which has ever scorned it. In a moment of careless expansion one incautious sentence is enough to give the alarm. Every hour I keep silent is an hour to the good, an hour in which the Enterprise grows in vigour. Gentlemen, I have imposed the silence of a hermit on my lips. I have nipped every impulse of family affection in my heart. I have renounced the cheering presence of my friends for fear their visits should arouse suspicion. No, my dear son Nicholas, you seek in vain to stifle me by one of those obscure deaths which make one wonder whether life was worth living ! In vain you try to do away with me and seize upon my ideas—you, who have never had any ideas of your own save those you stole from me ! Think, Gentlemen, of the martyrdom of a man who witnesses such ingratitude ! But I will escape like the Eagle ! I will break the bars of my cage like the Lion ! The great hour is approaching and the confusion of all Jenny Vipers. No hamlet in which my name will not be blessed. For, Gentlemen, life has become easier for all. The harvests will be more

abundant. The animals themselves seem to rejoice over earth's new prosperity and the lark sings more rapturous hymns. But to begin with, we must be silent and dissemble. Dreadful torture! In the future, I will speak to them only by signs. I am constantly trying to remember what I can have said to them when they keep hovering round me. I am constantly swearing I will not speak, and nevertheless I speak. I must be careful even of the expression of my face. Only use my hand to make signs with. Say "no" and "yes" and "go away" with one finger and two fingers, and put a finger on my lips when they try to tear my secrets from me.

X

WHAT an infliction ! thinks Nicholas. " . . . *departed this life in the sixty-eighth year of his age. The funeral procession will start from the deceased's house.*"

So old Lhérondel will no longer show his red nose at the meetings of the municipal council in the tiny public hall of Saint Saturnin ; and no doubt many an imagination among the hundred electors of the parish is already making wary plans for the next elections.

In the meadow where the early apple-trees are beginning to blossom, groups are talking with lowered voices. As Nicholas passes, he casts on them the rapid circular glance that has become habitual to him in the last few weeks ; are they talking of him and will the conversation stop abruptly when he comes up ? After going into the kitchen of the old farm-house, after shaking people's hands and sprinkling holy water on the coffin, he begins shaking hands again in the meadow ; then he joins a group of well-to-do peasants—the village notables. For the first time no one enquires after Mr. William—a little symptom.

" Died in the room he was born in, did old Lhérondel," says someone.

" In the room his father and grandfather before him were born in—and died in too," goes on the deputy-mayor, Chamondot, who piques himself on knowing the history of the parish better than anyone else. (And Nicholas, rather maliciously, likes giving him opportunities of airing his knowledge, to the annoyance of some of the company—especially if they are anxious, as they are this morning, about the premature flowering of the apple-trees.)

" If I am not mistaken there were already Lhérondels in the Brotherhood of St. John the Baptist in sixteen hundred —yes, that's right—in sixteen hundred and eighty-five.

There are still six families surviving in the parish from those days. M. le Curé and I counted them together in the register. There were the Perrets and the Delacourmontes, who were the grandparents of our Corbelins, not to mention the family of your humble servant ; and then there were the Vallès, who were called the Vallès of Petit-Bourg to distinguish them from the Vallès of Variville."

At this point the clergy make their appearance at the gate. The men take off their hats.

" That makes more than a century and more than two centuries," the deputy-mayor continues below his breath.

While they are hoisting the coffin on to the back of a cart, those of the company who possess black gloves think it proper to put them on. A member of the family presents Nicholas with the big taper which will not be lighted till they get to the church. Four other smaller tapers are handed to the other notables and the procession starts.

" Thank Heaven ! " thinks Nicholas, " Reine isn't here. How she would laugh if she could see me from behind a hedge, playing a part in this ceremonial ! "

He looks at the two wheels of the cart jolting in the ruts.

" A damned bad road," he thinks. " It needs seven or eight cartloads of stone to mend it, and the parish can't afford more than two."

They come to a turning and the brakes have to be put on to go down a little hill. The procession divides on each side of a heap of muck and the ranks get mixed. The five tapers alone try to keep their places, as though anxious to preserve the decorum of the rustic ceremony. The men's eyes turn to the apple-trees—those that blossom late and still look as if they were dead, and the others, whose sap has risen so impatiently that they are in danger from the morning mists—wooden skeletons, overgrown with moss and loaded with pink clusters. When they get to the church, everyone lends a hand. At last the bier is arranged under its black cloth, embroidered with silver tears ; the lighted tapers surround it and Nicholas takes his place with Chamondot in the two

stalls of honour. It'll be a long time now before it's all over. A good hour or so for dreaming. . . .

" 'The first shall be last' . . . Look at old Chamondot, how swelling with pride he is—and how his starched collar is throttling him ! Wouldn't he be pleased to sit here in this first place of mine ! And how uncomfortable the others would make it for him ! Though they don't mind letting me have it, because I never wanted it and would send them all packing at the first sign of unpleasantness. They chuckle if I meet with a mishap, but at bottom they think, 'He isn't proud for a Colombe of Saint Saturnin.' Only on the day I retired into my farm, the reasoning would be the other way round. I should be a 'Colombe who has no call to be proud.' And who knows, who knows ? . . . Perhaps it's the very thing that might tempt me to become so."

He looks at the statue of St. Joseph ; he looks at the congregation. "Fogarelle, Peutout, Crétet, Corbelin, sitting there on the front bench. What should I look like, if I was stuck in between Peutout and Fogarelle ? No, really, they are too lumpish. But Crétet must have had a fine face when he was young. His nose and brow make a line one sometimes sees in statues, and his expression is anything but stupid. If I were sitting next him in ready-made clothes, should I look any better ? Would there be anything to mark me out as a man capable of arranging himself a room full of books in his cowshed, and of nibbling one of them every evening—a man with a thousand luxuries—delicate luxuries of which only one is visible, and that an absurdity—the luxury of having staked his life on his father's word without asking for a signature ? . . ."

The congregation rises, sits down. Nicholas follows his neighbours' movements mechanically. He lets his thoughts wander. As a rule, he only begins to listen to a funeral mass when they get to the Dies Iræ.

"I remember Father's saying to me one day, when my old car irritated him so : 'Perhaps you think you'll be taken for a saint with your modest way of going on. But in my

opinion it's rather cheap. For you know perfectly well that however piggish and shabby you may be down here, nobody will treat you disrespectfully.' (How clever he was at knowing how to vex me!) 'The man in the Gospels sits at the end of the table, but he doesn't know his host is going to call him up higher. But you are running no risks. At the outside you are letting your children run them. For it's quite possible they may one day get left behind in their little corner. In any case you're cheating!' . . . Just look at Chamondot, how ostentatiously he follows the service in his prayer-book! If I offered him the foal he wanted to buy some months ago, he'd guess I was in need of money, and the scalp-dance would begin."

The service seems interminable and then the harmonium suddenly rouses him. "Hulloa!" he says to himself, "the time's getting on after all. They've got to the great hymn they chant without understanding a word of it. . . .

Dies iræ, dies illa,
Solvet sæclum in favilla. . . .

"And everything will be swept away by the tempest, and the ground will be laid bare, and what seemed as eternal as the mountain ranges will vanish like sand-heaps in the wind."

The choristers, standing stiffly in their black gowns, answer each other in alternate verses, soft and loud.

Mors stupebit et natura
Cum resurget creatura. . . .

"Man will be naked then, shorn of all the trappings that give him importance, of all his windy, noisy contrivances. Naked and reduced to his little self—like a conscript up before a medical board. 'Let's see your chest measurements! Show us your tongue!' . . ."

Judex ergo cum sedebit
Quidquid latet apparebit,
Nil inultum remanebit.

" And all intruders among the ancient occupiers of the soil will be pointed out and denounced. What a stir we bustlers have made in the course of a few years ! What bubbles in the dough of which we think ourselves the leaven ! Whilst the Lhérondels' house is just as it was, still standing in the grass as it did when its beams were first put together. One single revolution in its history, the day when it was roofed with tiles instead of thatch. (But the devil a well have they had the gumption to dig in ten generations !) No matter, it's we who are the parvenus, and if we disappeared, life would again relapse into its immemorial stagnation, for all the little momentary disturbance we have made in it."

Quid sum miser nunc dicturus ?
Quem patronum rogaturus ? . . .

" Heavens ! shall I have to go on holding this taper for ever ? . . ."

XI

OLD PEOPLE do not sleep and are annoyed that others should want to. Now that the evenings are warmer, the windows are sometimes kept open. The night is quivering with the stir of spring and filled with the innumerable croaking of the meadow frogs, blended into a strange raucous hymn. William Colombe will not allow the windows to be shut, or the lights to be lighted ; he will not allow Jourdaine to leave him.

" You regret your drawing-room atmosphere," he says sometimes. " You don't understand what is really great."

She has long since ceased to protest. She merely waits now—waits for the days to go by—for the year's slow wheel to turn. . . . If only there were a possibility of knowing what is going on in Morocco. For several days her father has been teasing her with a fresh demand :

" Since you're too sleepy to listen to the voices of nature at night, don't refuse so obstinately to give me the means of hearing them in the day-time ! "

" But the whole countryside would line up along the roads and laugh at you."

" I'm above being laughed at. The Universe is my friend. It speaks to me and I understand it. Don't be always contradicting ! Paint me the over-all as I've told you to—leaf-coloured, so that I can get near the birds without their seeing me. You women wear coloured clothes and flowers in your hats. Do you think you're less ridiculous ? You can paint flowers on it too, if you like."

Worn out at last, she gives in.

" Very well, I'll dye it green. But don't think I shall go out with you in such a get-up."

" I'll excuse you, my dear. I'll excuse you. The lady we're expecting will do as well. Have you sent my telegram ? "

The days are past when there was such dismay at having a poor harmless Ninette in the house. Among the letters of people applying for the situation, her father seems to have taken a fancy to one in particular. Is it for the name or the handwriting ? Jourdaine has yielded there too. She has written to the addresses given as reference and received excellent testimonials. After all, this fresh caprice may neutralise the others—may put wonderful reforms and shady agents into the background and make poor Mr. Foulque's position, which has become untenable, a little easier.

It is impossible not to be sorry for the new arrival (a jolly fat body, with an opulent bust, and looking more fitted to satisfy the needs of nurslings than to attend to an old gentleman), impossible not to be sorry for her as she goes off with Mr. Colombe, in her nurse's costume, carrying the overall in a basket. Jourdaine, in order to avoid gossip, has dyed the stuff in her basin and dried it in front of a fire in her own room. But her father is still not satisfied that this garment—a kind of shirt a heretic going to an auto-da-fé might wear—will make him invisible. He insists on her painting it with green blobs to look something like leaves and branches ; she has been obliged too to colour a napkin in the same way for him to put over his hat. As a reward for her being so obliging, she has succeeded with difficulty in extracting a promise that the costume shall not be put on before they get to the wood. The language of reason would no doubt have been, "Let the passers-by see how ridiculous our father is and judge between him and us ! " But there is a higher wisdom in the hearts of the people which cries shame on those children who allow their fathers to become a laughing-stock. As the two go off together, Jourdaine is relieved to see that no one seems to take any particular notice of them.

But a plain brown coat is as good a disguise for a man who is stalking game as a painted overall. Nicholas has slipped out behind the servants' quarters and cautiously advances through the copse-wood, trying to guess what direction his father will take. As one might have foretold, the old man turns to the left towards the fresh clearings. Then Nicholas forges straight ahead as if he were cutting off a hare's way of escape, gains ground rapidly, reaches the path and looks for a bush behind which he can take cover ; but he finds none leafy enough, so that at the last moment he has to flatten himself behind the trunk of a great beech-tree.

The couple come into view round a corner; the woman, a step or two behind, is nervously following the parti-coloured scarecrow as it creeps slowly on. The poor old man, however, is more pitiable than alarming, with the crumpled napkin falling over his eyes, and the edge of his trousers showing below the painted overall.

" I'm following, Mr. Colombe, I'm following," the woman says, though without coming close up to him.

" You have no faith, Madame Ménerba," he replies patiently. " Women hardly ever have faith. You have heard that Man is the King of Nature, but for you it's an empty phrase. . . . You're not listening to what I'm saying ! . . . In old days, I used to have little boxes hung up in the trees for the woodpeckers and starlings to make their nests in, but I reasoned like a child. . . . Man is king because of the terror he spreads around him, but when suffering has made him great, when he rises to the comprehension of the Universe, it is out of love that creatures obey him. You will see how everything obeys me."

At the solemn gesture of his upraised arm, the woman screws up her lips, no doubt repressing a burst of laughter by means of this little grimace. . . . Since Maître Ramelle wants documents likely to make an impression on a bench of magistrates, what could be more convincing than this

scene? . . . But the light is bad and a tiresome gorse-bush is in the way; Nicholas would have to risk showing himself, if he were to focus his camera properly.

" I hope you aren't frightened of animals," the old man goes on. " My grand-daughter is so silly that when I tried to show her some, she ran away. . . . But I don't intend to call up any very terrible ones—and yet man could force those too to obey him, if he used all his powers. . . . You shall see. . . . You shall see things you would never have thought possible ! "

His voice wavers between the tone a man takes to impress children and the one he uses to excite and deceive himself.

" Let's go to the top of that rocky slope. Don't be frightened; there are some big stones there we can sit on. But mind you don't open your lips. Don't say a word more. . . . Sh ! . . . Sh ! . . ."

He walks on again with a jerky step, as if he was trying, or pretending, to walk on tiptoe, in spite of his skirts and his stick.

This time Nicholas knows where to post himself; he runs down a deer track, jumps across a bit of bog, brushes his way through branches. " How is it," he thinks, " that fat creature hasn't driven him wild already? He won't be able to endure her another three days."

On the stony slope—a favourite object for short walks—is a special spot from which there is a view over a wooded dell; it is there that people usually sit and rest. A dozen yards further on, the boughs of a hazel coppice grow right down to the ground. Nicholas slips into it, lies flat on his face, arranges his camera and prepares a little opening through the leaves.

When the green phantom at last makes its appearance, it looks still more forlorn than before. The old man has walked the whole way without help; he is obviously exhausted. Weary of continually lifting up the rag that falls over his eyes, he tries to look out from underneath it and has to keep

his head thrown back. But notwithstanding his fatigue, he continues to make signs with his hands that Mme Ménerba is not to talk. He points out a block of stone where she is to sit down and he himself drops on to another a little further off.

What incantations are these preparations to lead to? William Colombe seems sunk in such immobility that Nicholas wonders whether he hasn't fallen asleep. The robins, tits and wrens, frightened into silence for a moment, begin their chirping in the bushes once more. They hop along the brambles, fly off and return. Bunches of wings chase each other in a flurry, separate and begin again in a neighbouring tree. Are the old man's charms to be exercised over these little birds? Does he hope the songsters will come and settle on his poor, crudely painted garment and take its spots for leaves and branches? No; his drooping veil prevents him from looking in their direction. His eyes are fixed on the stones and seem to be expecting something to emerge from the ground itself. And suddenly Nicholas hears a kind of little whistling, which he had not distinguished at first from the chirps and twitters of the birds—not a whistling made by the lips, but a vaguer timider sound that seems to come from between the tongue and teeth. Still not a movement. Then, very gently, the magician stirs an arm and stretches it in the direction of the stout lady to draw her attention to something on the rocky slope. The finger is still raised but gradually changes place, as it seems to follow a moving object and then to point out a second and a third. The faint hissing keeps on. The finger is just lowered and shows that the thing on the ground is coming nearer. "The lizards!" thinks Nicholas. "Poor old thing, he's trying to charm the lizards! . . . When we were children, he never taught us this innocent game. And it's for this little shepherd-boy's pastime that he has dressed himself up in that grotesque domino and defied public opinion and trampled the greater part of his admirable intelligence underfoot! . . . Perhaps he's hoping to charm that fat female too, sitting

there goggling and not worthy even to look at a hen in a poultry-yard. . . . Upon my word, it looks as if they were all round him. . . . But he can't whistle properly. If only I could do it for him ! . . . Will he succeed in getting them on to his shoes ? "

But he suddenly sees Mme Ménerba pull away her legs and jerk backwards. She no doubt thinks herself heroic for not having screamed. But it's all over. The lizards must have disappeared and they won't come back. Nicholas in his heart calls down curses on the stupid woman. Incapable of being touched by such an engaging weakness ! may her legs be scratched with brambles ! may she find a slow-worm in her bed ! The old man contents himself with saying sadly :

" Now you've frightened them away. We shall never get them to come back. And yet they wouldn't have hurt you. Help me off with these things. They're no good now."

He takes the painted napkin off his head. He who has lived since childhood in amity with Nature, he who at the end of a long hard life of self-denial has been visited by dreams of strange greatness, is now nothing but a poor old man at the mercy of scoffers. The enchanted disguise is nothing but paint and rags. Mme Ménerba hastily removes the overall and hides it in the basket. William Colombe has not enough vanity left at his command now to get up and walk without her help.

When they have disappeared, Nicholas comes out from his hiding-place. He looks at the mechanism of his camera —a camera bought on purpose for this perfidious ambush. The distance has been well calculated. The proof positive was there in front of the lens. He had only to put his finger on the little lever and the fools on the bench would have exclaimed at such startling evidence of madness, while missing all its pathos. . . . Nicholas turns the camera up towards the clouds and presses. The click is so slight that the lizards themselves would not have noticed it. And so, instead of a

treacherous proof, the little box, carefully folded away in his pocket, contains nothing but a view of the sky. But this time the treachery is towards Saint Saturnin. Saint Saturnin has lost one of its chances. . . .

XII

From Lieutenant de Sinnis

Mother darling,

I make no doubt the newspapers have dished you up a fine mess of false news—having carefully omitted the few grains of real pepper that might have been worth a wry face. The worst of what they have not *said is that my brother-officer, Leturel, was apparently caught before he had time to blow his brains out. But don't be anxious about me. We are so well guarded here that whatever happens we shall have time to take proper measures, so that you can go on sleeping the sleep of the just.*

But to tell you the truth—it's rather risky to confide it to a letter, but I'm just dying to talk to you about it—to tell you the truth, or rather to convey it to you in a way you'll have no difficulty in understanding, I must admit that a certain friend of mine, to whom I am particularly attached, and for whom you, I think, have some regard too, has lately run an infinitely more serious danger than that of being potted by a native rifle—neither more nor less than the danger of being court-martialled!

You know I'm not allowed an Army doctor up here, because those worthy gentlemen mustn't be disturbed for less than four hundred men, and I've only got half that number in my detachment. And when there's no doctor there are no medicines either. All the better, however, for my renown! With my two portmanteaux full of bottles and pills and plasters, which I commandeered, as you know, out of the Army stores, I worked such marvels—in spite of innocuously mixing up some of the serums and breaking a needle or two in my Arabs' hides—that my reputation has travelled far and wide. And lo and behold, three days ago two horsemen rode up to the camp—on such horses! A bay and a black—such horses, that one can't ever count oneself altogether unhappy again, if one has just had the luck to hear them neigh once! And sitting behind one of the horsemen was a charmer of a little boy, beautifully washed and

dressed, as plump as a partridge and as solemn as an owl. The audience began with the usual salaams, compliments, tea, etc. I was then shown an incomprehensible letter, which I was fortunately able to make out from the comments that were passed. It came from my neighbour opposite, Mohammed-ben-Aziz-ben-Mohammed, the terror of our outposts. He implored me to come and save his eldest son who, as far as I could make out, was ill with the plague. He sent his second son as a hostage and a damascene plate as a present. You may be sure that I wasn't going to miss such a miraculous chance. So I nobly refused the hostage and the present and declared that the word of an Arab chief was the only security I attached any importance to, and that if my poor skill could prevail, the only reward I coveted was a friend's happiness. This sentence was spoken with a lordly air—gestures and voice to match. Nothing, by the way, proved that the charming little boy was anything but the son of a slave, and I may add, in order not to appear too magnificent, that the plate struck me as being pure brummagem.

. . . The man I mentioned just now—for whom you have some regard—and I too—gave his orders, made all his arrangements and mounted his good steed. I won't spoil his story by shortening it—the account of his reception in the casba, *the theatrical flourishes with which he played his part of physician—and most amazing of all the fact that the young patient really seems to be recovering. All of that must wait till I have time for a longer letter. The only thing to be added now is that it was all marvellous, including the little twinge you feel in your nerves when you start out on an adventure all by yourself, trusting to your good genius.*

But now comes the dreadful part of the story. Prepare for your blood to curdle in your veins! He had hardly been back twenty minutes, when up came an inspection party with a general at its head! I imagine what the scandal would have been if he had been an hour earlier. I spend sleepless nights pleading a desperate cause with arguments that would only aggravate the offence. And yet, our friend may flatter himself that he has done more for the safety of this little mountain district than all the staff-college experts with their theories and routine together. And you should see his prestige now! His men wouldn't be surprised to see him give orders to the

sun. Now, as you know, the conceited fellow only really enjoys life when he is playing the part of a demi-god.

Unfortunately, I can't answer for the stupidities they may commit to the right or left of me. If there are any real bothers, that's where they'll come from. In the meantime we have to keep a sharp look-out. You shall have another letter as shortly as possible.

Fondest love

Gilbert.

PS. Don't let yourself be gobbled up by Saint Saturnin and its worries. I'm terrified lest they should make you lose that shade—that suggestion—that almost nothing of a double chin that is so becoming to you and gives your face just that touch of majesty befitting the mother of a prince who reigns over two hundred cut-throats.

Gibbie.

PS. I am bringing you back a fine silver bracelet given me by the mother of my miraculous young patient. I wouldn't accept anything else. Imagine if they'd been able to add the charge of accepting bribes to that of desertion!

G.

The son as well as the father understands the art of fixing a hook into a tender heart and cruelly pulling on the line. In other days Jourdaine's pride would have come to her assistance. But the letter is dated nearly a month back. Why such delay? A later letter would have already had time to reach her. Why? . . .

As she passes in front of a mirror she examines her chin. It is only too true that she will be obliged to choose, like her mother, between looking cadaverous or a little bit too plump. She puffs out her nostrils, turns down the corners of her lips. What a tiny displacement of the features is enough to call up a kind of Messalina! She must have looked like that under her mask and domino one evening at a fancy-dress ball when, surrounded by a set of more or less tipsy men (she will remember it with shame to her

dying day), she did nothing to extricate herself and, in an abominable trance of enjoyment, allowed their rude hands to squeeze and paw her. She alters her grimace, draws her eyebrows together and dilates her eyes. Now she has put the mask of fear on her face—a close-fitting mask. It has sometimes happened to her as a child to be frightened out of her wits at sight of the terrified spectre in the looking-glass. To-day a very little more of this game would make her jump around with apprehension and start back from the sofa for fear of feeling a hand seize her by the ankle. . . . And then, all these fusses, this tangle of lies, will it never be possible to get free from them again? . . . Lawyers, magistrates, what will it all end in? . . .

XIII

A FICTITIOUS cock-crow gives warning when William Colombe and his lady companion appear in front of the house. It is the sign for Proult, the gardener, to disappear behind his raspberry bushes, which are thick enough to hide him from head to foot. For the last week the old man's irritability has been on the increase. He goes out and comes in, makes incessant calls upon Mme Ménerba and suddenly takes to pantomime, refusing to utter a word—as though, in a blind attempt to vanquish the obscure opposition he feels about him, he were vaguely striking right and left and trying to get rid of his enemies by dismissing first one and then the other at random. Proult has been ordered to leave Saint Saturnin ; but with Nicholas's guarantee he stays on in his garden. The beans have not got their sticks yet ; the leeks are not pricked out. After all the kitchen garden can't be left to go to rack and ruin because of an old man's nonsense.

Wherever he goes now, William Colombe finds the paths have been suddenly deserted, and he meets nothing in his walks but here and there an abandoned wheelbarrow or discarded spade, which seems to be doing all by itself the work of men who have vanished.

When Babet in the linen-room hears the voices and steps of the couple coming back from their walk, she hastily shuts the window. Then she returns to her task of cleaning Mlle Cheu's dress which its owner has just spread on a chair to bear witness to an outrageous insult. For this morning, as she was arranging the breakfast tray in front of Mr. Colombe, the contents of a cup of *café-au-lait* had been flung in her face.

" Not a day later than to-morrow," cries Jenny in her fury, " I leave. Do you hear, not a day later. Mme de Sinnis may beg me as much as she pleases. You see for yourself—it's a got-up plan. The house must be emptied. And as his children do nothing to prevent it, to-morrow it'll be your turn."

Jourdaine, after watching her father off, hurries to the letter-box at the back of the house. The postman is the only person who has a key, but everybody knows that you have only to lever up the little door with the help of a coin and it opens at once. There are a dozen or so letters in the box, dictated by her father the evening before to the companion, and addressed to Mr. X, gardener, or under-gardener, or head-gardener. Jourdaine abstracts a good half of them. There will be so many the fewer candidates for Proult's place. The excellent fellow really cannot be turned out neck and crop with his family of children, after ten years' service. . . . Ménerba seems a careful, sensible woman. She has been treated with confidence. Enough has been said for her to understand the difficulties of the situation. Then how is it that in spite of all instructions . . . ?

The old man takes the White Gates avenue. The two trees, their leaves withered, and their scars turned yellow, are still lying on the ground. No one has cared to clear away so much as their broken branches. Ivanoff, tethering the young oxen in the meadow, sees the couple from afar.

" Look out," says he to the man helping him, " here he comes with his new female ! "

And they both get behind the hedge.

" Happily," says he again, " it's nothing but talk, talk, talk, and in the meantime he doesn't use his eyes."

But the other is less certain.

" If he don't see what's going on, why did the bloody

old fool call out when Richard passed him in his cart: 'As for you, you don't even take the trouble to hide now!'"

They look through the branches at the couple, coming on a step or two at a time, then stopping, then taking a step or two more.

"You know what old Elodie said," goes on the labourer. "I'd crumble all my week's bread in front of the old cock and his bird, if I could coax them into the bull's stall. That would be a fine joke! Toss the old boy with your horns! Don't wait haying season. Toss the old boy."

Ivanoff shifts the mallet on his shoulder:

"In our parts," he murmurs, "people don't make such a fuss. A little paraffin . . . and a match . . ."

He likes acquiring prestige by savage tales about his country.

"If he really said that to Richard," he adds, "well, in my opinion . . . He didn't think of it by himself. . . . Someone's been peaching."

Not so long ago there would have been nothing but smiles at the idea that Jenny Cheu could leave Saint Saturnin. One might as easily imagine the steps of the staircase or the cupboard doors migrating to another house. But this is the third or fourth alarm. Even at the risk of coming back repentant after a month or two, Jenny might very well carry out her plan; and Jourdaine feels as if she no longer had the strength to deal with the consequences of such a situation. She calculates, however, that it will be more efficacious to use indirect measures of defence.

"I implore you, Babet, to reason with her. Make her understand that when a person's ill . . . What's to become of us if we can't rely on the people of the house, if we can't count on the devotion and fidelity we have had up till now—luckily for us? You understand the circumstances, whereas newcomers . . ."

Babet lets her talk. This incense, burnt by humiliated masters under the nostrils of their servants, is far from unpleasing to her.

" Oh, this time," says she, " she has made up her mind."

But with a little smile that betokens an infinite superiority to all follies, be they of the rich and powerful, or merely of a conceited housekeeper, she directs a knowing wink towards the corner of the room and goes on :

" Only there's her plant ! "

Jourdaine catches sight of a flower-pot and in it a cactus looking like nothing on earth.

" No fear of her going away just yet ! "

And as Jourdaine seems not to understand, " She must wait to see it flower," goes on the little hunchback. " The year of the floods, when her sister was so ill and thought she was going to die, she wouldn't go to her, and pretended it was because she wouldn't leave Madame Colombe. But the real reason . . . And the year the mattresses were done up—the year before the whooping cough, when she wouldn't take her holiday . . . And yet the thing only had two buds then, and now—just count—it's got sixteen ! " Then, going up to the thorny spider, " I must say," she continues, with a condescension not unmingled with respect, " I must say that when it flowers . . ."

Jourdaine in her turn goes up to look at the fetish—the weird creature on whom depends, in part at any rate, the little bit of security they still cling to.

" It really does flower," concedes Babet, " real flowers of red straw. But as brittle as glass. And that's why she can't take her pot with her."

The couple, on their return from their walk, loiter in the garden-path in order to meet the postman. They take the letters from him, and the man, continuing his round by a short-cut, meets Ivanoff and the farm-hand.

“ They asked for their letters,” says the postman. “ Nothing for her, but two for him : one with a postmark it was impossible to make out. The other’s from that Paris contractor.”

“ Fling their letters on to the dung-heap,” says the farm-hand, “ and let’s have a little peace, good Lord ! ”

And the tale of grievances pours forth.

“ We had to climb on to the roof, didn’t we, Mr. Ivanoff? To fasten the tarpaulins. Of course the tiler put back two tiles as fast as he took away three ; but all the same, with this rain, the water’s beginning to leak into the rooms. Fortunately the old master doesn’t seem to care a brass farthing now about what we’re doing. And that there digging of his ! You should just see ! A regular pond ! And the water flooding the cellar ! What a life ! ”

As Nicholas, on his side, returns to the farm, he hears shouts and furious barkings. His father’s two setters have been driven into a corner up against the wall by means of a stout stick and a pair of hob-nailed boots. There they stand, showing their teeth and bristling with fury. The postman gazes in dismay at a great rent in his blue cloth trousers. But feel his thigh as he may, no, there is nothing ; it’s not even been grazed. The two dogs answer Nicholas’s call by savage snarlings. Everybody speaks at once :

“ When no one had as much as looked at them. . . . Such gentle beasts as they were. . . . To be suddenly taken like that ! Just as if they’d gone mad ! Take care, Mr. Nicholas ! ”

And as a matter of fact, when he puts out his hand to pat one of the setters, he has only just time to pull it away to escape being bitten.

“ Gently, Biscot, gently ! What’s the matter, old chap ? You can’t understand what’s going on ? Is that it ? Where’s your master ? Doesn’t he want you now ? Why aren’t you with him ? ”

" And yet they're faithful beasts, those dogs," says the cow-wife ; " but they keep wandering about like lost souls. They don't know what to make of it."

" When they lose their master," says someone else, " some folk say they do let themselves die of hunger."

" Come along then ! " goes on Nicholas. " Come with me to the house ! "

But the dogs lower their heads, slouch along by the wall and make off to the woods.

Jourdaine is on the look-out for her brother. These daily councils of war are their chief support. The absurd catastrophe won't have destroyed everything, so long as they have enough proper pride left not to betray their weariness to each other and can even make light of their growing disgust with a kind of humour.

After hearing about Mlle Cheu, Nicholas draws the following conclusions :

" We have a hold on her for another month, thanks to her flower-pot ; but what's better still, I think we have a hold on Cibar too. So far we haven't been treated to any anonymous letters. But now they have begun. Listen to this :

Sir,

I have not the honour of your acquaintance, but it is impossible for a man of any decency to tolerate the way in which your generosity is being abused. A sly-faced jade has entered your house and you had better beware of her goings-on. You will know your best course of action without my presuming to say more.

" No signature. Have you noticed that Cibar hasn't reappeared since the good lady's arrival ? Perhaps his great philanthropical works are being a little neglected. He wants

to get rid of his rival. An excellent sign. Otherwise, I can't see where this attack can come from."

As she examines the paper with disgust, he adds :

" Don't look so scared at the sight of an anonymous letter. We must get accustomed to that kind of thing too. . . . And the cactus ! You aren't sufficiently amazed by it. We are spoilt ; we are incapable of enjoying things as we ought. With all the beauties of the universe at our disposal, we don't look at them. While here, at any rate, are two or three flowers which will have been appreciated to the full."

" Yes," she answers, " when you have only one cow left. . . ."

" I shall at last understand how she came to be a divinity. . . . It is true that I shall perhaps be so harassed with toil that I shall have no time to adore her dress and her beautiful eyes. . . . Make haste. They'll be coming back in a moment. You mustn't be seen leaving my room."

XIV

THE WATER that has filtered into the cellar has to be drained away by means of a pump, which has been placed near the only suitable ventilating-hole at the end of the house, behind a thick clump of trees. As Nicholas is making towards the place in order to see how the work is progressing, Ivanoff comes out from behind the bushes and goes to meet him.

" I want to screw up the pump," says he, " and someone has taken my spanner again. Could you lend me yours ? "

They go together to the workshop. But when the Russian has been given the tool, he seems to have forgotten what he wanted it for.

" There is something the matter with the churn motor," he says. " It's grating. I can't think why."

In general, he is handy enough. What's wrong with him this morning ? As he insists, however, Nicholas follows him to the farm. When the machinery is set in motion, its working is perhaps not absolutely smooth, but then it has made that rattling noise for a long time past.

" This morning," says Ivanoff, " I could do nothing with it."

But Nicholas does not feel inclined to pull it to pieces.

" Come now," he says, " it has been just like this for the last six months and has made our butter all right in spite of it."

They try it over several times, make one or two adjustments, tighten the strap, and finally Nicholas, not without a touch of ill-humour, exclaims :

" Heavens, man ! It isn't clockwork. You must manage with it as it is."

And he leaves Ivanoff and returns to the house.

A little later, they come to tell him that Mr. Colombe

has had a fall in the garden, that he has been brought back to his room and put to bed. He goes at once to the main building and his sister joins him on the stairs.

" Yes," says she ; " he was found on the ground in the little path between the rhododendrons. You know how absentminded he is. He must have stumbled over the pipe with which they're pumping out the cellar. He hasn't hurt himself much, for when he was once picked up, he was perfectly able to walk to his room. He says he was left lying there two hours in spite of his calls for help. But I don't think it can have really been much more than five minutes."

" It wasn't a slight stroke, was it ? " asks Nicholas.

She shakes her head.

" Does he speak as usual ? Can he move both his arms ? "

The voices, the faces of both brother and sister are in perfect control. There is no need for them to avoid each other's eyes in order to remain expressionless.

" Well," says Nicholas, " let's hope it'll discourage him from wandering about by himself."

He goes again to enquire in the afternoon. This time he questions Mme Ménerba, whom he meets coming out of his father's room.

" He's as well as possible," she replies rather loftily. " He wants to get up."

Then she blurts out, " Much better than the people who did the dirty trick hoped for."

" What do you mean ? "

" Oh, nothing."

" I beg your pardon. Kindly explain."

" Well, I say that a person doesn't stumble over a pipe that's lying flat on the ground."

" A man who drags his feet as he does."

" He declares someone pulled the pipe on purpose to make him fall."

" And do you believe such an absurd story ? "

" I only know what he says."

And turning her back on him, she disappears into the room.

At that, he goes downstairs to examine the place of the accident. The soft ground has been so trampled by the people who helped the old man up, that nothing can be gathered from its appearance. As for the pump, the work for which it was wanted is finished and it has been removed.

A little later he manages to get a talk with Jourdaine.

" I can't understand the woman's attitude," she says. " She seems to be afraid of leaving me alone in Father's room. As he was rather agitated, I wanted to put a spoonful of bromide in his soup, and I noticed the bottle had not been touched. So I asked her why she had not followed the doctor's instructions. She answered that *I* might give him poison if I pleased, but that *she* wasn't going to. A hostile, suspicious creature. And she doesn't seem to have any notion either of nursing—in spite of all her certificates."

" And he ? What's this story of his having been tripped up ? "

" He continues to declare his foot was pulled from behind."

" And is he up now ? "

" Yes, he's up."

Impossible to go out without the risk of coming upon Ivanoff. Impossible to meet him without asking for explanations. . . . It is late before Nicholas forces himself to go down to the farm. The Russian is with one of his men at the pig-sties which they are busy cleaning. Above all nothing must be said to attract the other man's attention.

" When you've finished—there's no hurry—will you come with me down to the long meadow pond. I think I've found out where the leak is."

It would still be possible to say nothing, to pretend to

have heard nothing, seen nothing. But what iniquitous code is Nicholas forced to take to task the only man in the world who is devoted to him ? He waits till they are in the fields ; he waits till they are a good distance from any hedge. He is afraid he won't be able to bring the words out.

" This morning when you came to look for me . . ."

" About the churn ? "

" No, about the spanner."

" Oh yes, the spanner. I have put it back in the workshop."

" And yours . . . was it really lost ? "

" It was in the coach-house. I'd forgotten I had been working at the lorry yesterday."

Nicholas feels he ought to be questioning him face to face and not sideways as one does when one is walking. But here in this meadow they are too much in view.

" When you left the pump . . . how was it you didn't see anything ? . . . Mr. William says he was lying there for two hours without anyone's coming to his help."

First defeat ! For this obvious exaggeration provides a way of escape only too easy to seize upon.

" Two hours, Mr. Nicholas ! But the whole job didn't take two hours. He probably fell when we were in the dairy. Two hours ! "

What else could Ivanoff answer ? He says exactly what he ought to say. He is not in the least flurried. He may possibly have prepared his replies, but he is not suspiciously ready with them, so that Nicholas finds courage to stop and say —this time, with as much stiffness as he can :

" He declares that as he was walking along, someone pulled the pipe so as to catch him by the foot."

He must keep control of the Russian's eyes. But how can he control eyes that have permission to smile ?

" It's like the two hours, Mr. Nicholas. Pull the pipe ! "

They continue their walk to the pond, but Nicholas stops a second time.

" If someone wanted to play a practical joke, it has

turned out badly, for he's persuaded now that people are trying to murder him. In any case I must find out what's at the bottom of it."

Is the Russian going to take a terrible advantage and reply, "And what if the joke had turned out . . . a success . . . ?" No, his tone still remains semi-ironical, so that it is impossible to guess what is making the corner of his lip twitch, whether it is the absurdity of the supposition or emotion.

"Nobody but myself touched the pump, so how in the world . . . ?"

It has sometimes happened to Nicholas to try and extort the truth by gazing into a delinquent's eyes with a look so searching that it seemed to probe his very heart. He knows quite well he is being cowardly now and using his weight only so far as he feels sure it will break nothing down.

"I admit you have not much to be grateful for as far as he is concerned, but still . . ."

Ivanoff remains unmoved.

"At that age," he says, "they are often angry with everyone."

Isn't that enough for Nicholas's dignity? And wouldn't the only sincere thing be to say, "My dear fellow, you wanted to do me a service. Thank you. But for a thousand reasons, it was a very great mistake." He tries again to give one more turn to the screw.

"I must be able to answer decidedly. So . . . was it or was it not you who tripped him up?"

There exists, no doubt, a certain tone of voice which would extort the confession, "Come, Mr. Nicholas, you are too clever not to understand." But perhaps this sentence would be followed by another, "And as far as that goes, which of us two is the most anxious to get rid of the old man?" But Nicholas's question is feebly shot and slips off a polished surface. Ivanoff is a man of education. He knows the value of the conventions without which it is impossible to live.

" You can answer," he said, " —and even swear that it was not. Hope he hasn't hurt himself."

Over ! No point of honour will extract another question from Nicholas now. Ivanoff has got out of it. Thank God ! Thank God ! Not one of his answers admitted anything. They have both got out of it—have taken refuge in uncertainties and pretences ! It was under the protection of the same conventions that his sister and he this morning had spoken to each other with decorum and betrayed no sign of anything unmentionable on their faces. Something must be said to show the odious interview is finished.

" You see," he says, " that's the place where the pond leaks. The rats have been at the clay again."

The Russian acknowledges the proffered reconciliation just a little too quickly.

" We'll repair it for you, Major ! "

This address belongs exclusively to the vocabulary of their most intimate moments. It gives Nicholas a painful little twinge, as if it had sealed their complicity. After a hypocritical piece of acting, the son has given his approbation.

XV

Jourdaine has hung up an old photograph of her father in the drawing-room near the door. It must have been taken when he was about thirty. A charming intelligent face—more charming than either of his sons'. It has Louis's clear eyes—eyes all frankness, all honesty ; but the features are softer, sweeter, and the hair grows like Nicholas's in a straight line parallel to the eyebrows. He must have looked like that on the day when, in spite of his brilliant record and the promise of an equally brilliant future, he had so pluckily resigned his commission in the army ; " I'm sorry, Colonel, but I shall be able to make better use of my powers elsewhere." (All his life, Colonel Verteyches remembered the strange obstinacy of the young man who talked of "wider horizons" and "heavier responsibilities." Jourdaine has also hung up a little portrait of him in her own room, and a family group of the same distant date on the landing. As she goes to see her father, she never fails to cast an appealing glance at these photographs, so that she may find in them the friendly eyes, the flame of spirituality which should surely still be discoverable in the sullen face old age has marred. But three little pictures hanging from three little nails are not of much avail to maintain at the proud level of the past a destiny now sinking to decay. The phantom with which Jourdaine tries to people the house fails lamentably in the office she requires from it. This is not the portrait of William Colombe, but of a good-looking younger brother, of a young unspotted victim ; and he too cries out in protest against the old man, "Look at what I was ! Look at what the wretch has made of me ! "

Moreover, the strange behaviour of the lady companion has absorbed all their attention for the last week. Mme Ménerba has not budged from the hostile attitude she took

up on the morning of the accident. At first, it was possible to wonder whether her resentment was not due to sincere feeling and whether she had not been astonished into animosity by the somewhat suspicious circumstances of William Colombe's fall. But Jourdaine has lately chanced to turn up one of the letters of recommendation received before the lady was engaged. It was dated from Marseilles and particularly complimentary. Louis has been asked to apply through one of his correspondents for a word of mouth confirmation of this letter. Now at the address mentioned no one has been found but a shady *concierge*, whose business is to forward letters to people about whom he is unable or unwilling to supply any definite information.

"I think I remember," says Jourdaine to Nicholas, "that all the other letters were dated from distant places where it was highly unlikely we should go to enquire ourselves. What amazes me is the rapidity with which the woman has grasped the ins and outs of the situation. My impression is she is looking out for an opportunity to make a scene."

The fact is that one morning when Jourdaine comes as usual to help her father dress, she finds the door locked. It is only after a great deal of insistence that she succeeds in getting it opened. There are times when she waits on the landing or goes out of her way in order to avoid unnecessary meetings, for once or twice lately the woman has attempted to brush rudely past her. As one evening she happens to be alone with her father, he takes her hand kindly and says with some hesitation :

"I feel rather shy about asking you. . . . If you see no reason against it . . . Mme Ménerba is our guest . . . and, my dear, if you don't mind . . . I should like her to be treated as one at table. . . ."

This is not the first time that father and daughter watch each other with equal anxiety, try the slippery ground with tentative words, and calculate how far each dares go as regards the other. But Jourdaine feels how impolitic it would be to show signs of weakness.

“ Did Madame Ménerba ask you ? ” she says.

“ How suspicious you are ! . . . How disagreeable ! ”

But this time, William Colombe retires discomfited. Until to-morrow at any rate, Jourdaine is still the stronger.

A few minutes, however, after she has gone to her room, Babet comes to say that her father wants her. She finds him in bed, with drawn features and an unusually pale face. Without looking at her and as if he were overcome with extreme weakness, “ Mme Ménerba,” he says, “ is very busy. . . . Would you . . . get some tea ? ”

The stout woman is moving about the room in her dressing-gown and slippers. The demeanour of the two is so singular that Jourdaine suspects some trick ; but as she cannot imagine what it can be, she goes to the dressing-room and puts the kettle on to boil. On casting a glance through the door, she sees Mme Ménerba calmly sitting beside the bed and holding her father's hand as if he were unwell. She might easily say that she is busy too and go upstairs to her room again, in order to oblige this sham of a nurse to go on with her job ; but not wishing to appear foolishly touchy, she pretends not to have noticed anything and returns to the bedroom with the tea-pot and cup. Her father, still without looking at her, signs to her to put the tray on a little table beside Mme Ménerba.

“ Thank you so much,” says that lady with a smile.

Still standing and feeling a little awkward, Jourdaine addresses her father :

“ Shall I help you drink it ? ” she asks.

He shakes his head almost imperceptibly.

“ He's not taking any,” says the lady companion, and proceeds to help herself first to tea and then to sugar.

Jourdaine is on the verge of seizing the cup and upsetting its contents ; but what kind of a scene will she find herself engaged in, if the woman answers with the words and gestures of a fish-wife ? She controls herself, smiles and lets drop with a sufficiently off-hand manner :

“ Take care. It's very hot. You'll burn your tongue.”

It must be supposed that the words go home, for red in the face with fury, the lady loses all restraint.

" Hot indeed ! If that was all ! But I'm glad you warned me ! To think I might have swallowed some of her mixture ! "

As she has put a spoonful to her lips, she spits it out into the saucer and rubs her mouth with her handkerchief.

" Perhaps you've got a bottle up your sleeve ? Not the one you used to dope him with every day. I showed him that, and if you had any eyes, you'd have noticed he never touches anything unless he sees you've tasted it yourself first. But I daresay you've got something stronger for me, as it seems I'm in your way and interfere with your little plans."

Then, throwing her arms round the old man, " Don't you be afraid, lovey, don't you be afraid ! They won't get rid of *me* as they did of the others. I'm here, dearie, I'll protect you. She shan't eat you up, she shan't, in spite of her fine gold teeth she thinks people don't see."

William Colombe's face is deathly white ; but he hugs the woman's arm to him with both his hands, and the frightened way in which he clings to her shows plainly enough where he thinks the danger lies.

After having fled, after having reproached herself for her flight, after having been on the point of going down again, to wake up Nicholas, after having chewed and rechewed the cud of her humiliation, when at last she is a little calmer, and since the hours of a sleepless night must be somehow killed, she sits down to her table and writes a note.

My darling boy,

Everything, however hard, would be bearable if I had news of you. There are thousands of probable explanations for your silence, as I constantly tell myself. But if you get this letter, I implore you to send me somehow or other some sign—the smallest sign—of your

existence. I'm not often so unreasonable. For pity's sake, write to me here, if it's only two lines, and, in case of accidents, another two to London.

Then, when she is a little more mistress of herself, she takes another sheet and addresses it to her husband.

They live in hopes of wearing me out, but, Nicholas included, no one understands that the secret of my strength is a last hope of being of some service to you. I will not conceal that it is a hope which is diminishing every day ; and there is every possibility that all you will see come back to you is a woman reduced to nothing but her own person—which is not worth much—and to the contents of her trunks. For considering the hands into which my poor father has fallen, we shall no doubt be forestalled in any measures we may attempt to take. Write and tell me you want me to stay at my post, that there are debts and payments falling due and creditors clamouring. As Louis has given you a clear idea of the situation tell me over again all the excellent reasons for my staying on at Saint Saturnin. As long as there is anything left to guard in this house, I will guard it for you faithfully. And if there remains only one last chance, I will take it, abject as it is—I mean, alas, the stroke that threatens a poor old man in the arms of a ghoul. But I cannot hide from you, my dear, that my weariness is extreme and my courage sometimes very near the breaking point.

XVI

NICHOLAS, in his indignation, was on the point of fetching the farm dog and setting it at the insolent intruder.

" We are allowing ourselves to be led to the slaughter like sheep. What do we risk by defending ourselves ? "

" But if you turn her out, you must see that Father will do all he can to join her and we shall only be able to stop him by force. Are we prepared to lock him up in his room and prevent him from ever going out ? Can you conceive what that would mean ? "

She succeeds in persuading her brother to consult Maître Ramelle first. Now there is nothing that Ramelle fears so much as doing anything illegal. Cibar would be sure to hear of it. Madness to offer him such a weapon. . . . In the meantime Jourdaine has told her father that as she does not wish to meet Mme Ménerba, she will take her meals for the future with Nicholas. Lastly she has let Louis know that his presence is urgently needed. He has promised to come that very evening.

Louis's prestige is still intact. His orders are orders and not like Nicholas's, attempts at persuasion. The lady companion makes no remonstrance when he tells her to leave the room, and his father, upset by this sudden arrival, sits silent in his arm-chair. Louis goes straight to the point ; he has his plan.

" I will not say a single word in my own name," says he. " You might suspect me of not being disinterested. You shall speak yourself and we will submit respectfully to what you say."

The old man's look of astonishment turns into one of

suspicion as Louis pulls out a few sheets of paper from his pocket and proceeds to unfold them.

"On your seventieth birthday, you established our statutes once for all. You did so in terms that admirably express the ideas in which we were brought up and which we still hold. So all I shall have to do is to read what you have written ; you will subscribe to it and we shall accept it without changing a single letter."

The old man sees the trap in which he is to be caught opening under his feet, and begins at once to resist.

"I refuse ! I refuse ! You think my mind is . . . but I'm searching for other—higher things. . . . You shan't read it."

"I will," says Louis, "even if we have to spend the whole evening over it."

"I shall talk all the time. I won't listen."

"Then I shall begin again. It's fine enough to bear reading over several times."

He knows that his physical endurance will end by breaking down a resistance of this kind and that his nerves will hold out longer than the old man's. This is a card he has been keeping by him for the last six months—a trump card, he thinks, on which he relies for winning the game—but it was not in a fit of violence he had hoped to play it. William Colombe puts his fingers in his ears, while his son reads :

"*And indeed it is a decisive date in the career of a man who has lived long years of laborious activity, and is now quitting the occupations of a lifetime to enter upon what will no doubt be his final retirement. . . .*"

"I can't hear a word ! You're wasting your time !"

Louis raises his voice, and then is forced to raise it still more :

"*I have always thought it a mistake to wait till one is overtaken by the decrepitude of age in order to make room for the younger*

generation. If we wish to cast no shadow on our children's affection, we should not tempt them too sorely to wish us out of the way. Should one of you . . ."

"I'm not listening! I'm not listening!" repeats the old man.

"*. . . Should one of you feel inclined—I will not say to look forward to my departure with impatience—but simply to dream of the facilities it might give him, it would be enough to poison the whole fruit of my past exertions and make me think my life had ended in failure. . . .*"

William Colombe's stiff clumsy hands are certainly unable to prevent the sound from reaching him. But filtering through this impediment, what can remain save shattered fragments of those calm, gentle words in which he had tried to express his affection and his generosity. Louis turns the second page:

"*. . . And lastly Nicholas, the least favoured of the three, disposes of a field of action at Saint Saturnin which is modest, it is true, but which he declares he prefers to any other. Our old house could not be in better hands. Let him keep it—symbol as it is of some of the robuster virtues. . . .*"

At Nicholas's name, the old man begins working his lips and making a loud, muttering noise. He goes on doing this continuously, like a hermit trying to drown the devil's voice by reciting *paters* and *aves*. Louis with a sore heart pursues his reading paragraph after paragraph.

"*. . . The Time has now come for me to acknowledge—and I do so without bitterness, and even with a certain unlooked for joy—that 'I must diminish and you must increase.' I have tried to become unnecessary, and now I step aside from the game, without any of those vain ambitions in which old people generally take pleasure. . . .*"

But, alas, those chains, once so nobly forged in the day of strength, whose links, so powerful were they, their maker himself could not have broken—those chains, in the day of weakness, have turned into a mere string of empty words. They have had their day. Their time is past. It is too late now to appeal to their power. Even the story of the little boy who carried stones to the top of the hill, seems to tell of a stranger. And Louis reaches the last passage :

" *. . . I intend to take no posthumous steps, not because I shrink from considering my death, but because I have more confidence in your uprightness and mutual affection than in measures which, if I settled on them to-day, might cease to be suited to the circumstances to-morrow. No doubt you would consider my decisions just, but what you decide for yourselves will be better.*"

Obstinate mutterings, desperate repetitions of " I'm not listening ! I'm not listening ! " drown these sentences.

" They aren't my words," cries Louis, " they're yours. Look at your handwriting. Those pages were written by you, our father. They are the outcome of your mature reflection, your goodness of heart. They sum up the inspiration of your whole life."

The old man tries to snatch the pages from him.

" Give them to me ! "

" No. Besides you can't destroy them. We know them by heart. And as they represent the law you yourself wished us to obey, I shall not leave the room till we have read them over again, but quietly this time, as they deserve to be read."

If his three children were to open the door noiselessly and approach on tiptoe with murderous intentions, if it were the Angel of Death himself coming to take him by the hand, no phantom could terrify the old man more than the ghost that rises up before him—his own face still in the vigour of its age, his own voice attempting to force him into a miserable subjection.

"Leave me," he groans. "I beg you! I implore you!"

But as the merciless son begins to read again, he hunches himself up in his arm-chair and starts trembling all over.

This time Louis reads calmly, composedly, without accentuating a word. But he is conscious his perseverance is wasted. It is too late. The Colombes of Saint Saturnin pride themselves on attaching importance only to those things that have an intrinsic value, that exist independently of time, outside the reach of ephemeral circumstances, untouched by any wind that blows. If chances go by and are lost, it means they were not worth the trouble of seizing. But that eternal reason itself should have its hazards, its opportunities, its new moons, this is a stumbling-block that Louis cannot get over. Must the language of men be abandoned? Must prayers be resorted to and appeals to pity?

"Is there anything in these pages," he says gently, "that you think no longer true, anything you would like altered?"

No answer and no relaxing of the convulsive movement of the hunched figure in the chair.

"Even if there are things that are difficult to say, wouldn't it be better to talk them over frankly?"

For a second, Louis thinks there are signs of relenting.

"Then why not," he goes on, "adopt your letter as a basis for an equitable understanding? And then we will engage not to interfere any further with your wishes."

His father casts a sidelong glance at the small table standing beside him.

"The table," he says, "at . . . the celebrated table with the dig of the penknife in it . . . at Fontainebleau. . . . You're not helping me with the names on purpose. You want me to sign my abdication, don't you? *He* signed. Napoleon was cowardly enough to sign. But *I* . . ."

And suddenly he remembers his resolution of silence. He puts his finger on his lips and makes gestures like a man wishing to show he is dumb. In vain Louis tries to be persuasive, explaining point by point what he wants. He can

get no reply but this obstinate pantomime. Then he thinks he may be more successful by going to the root of his father's antagonism. He speaks of all the absurd misunderstandings that have arisen, brings out into the light of day the bugbear of poison.

" Would you like me to drink a quarter of the bottle before your eyes ? "

Then he attacks the other nucleus of suspicions—the circumstances of his father's fall. The hands continue the same gestures and become more and more feverish as the old man finds it more and more difficult to control himself ; but the position in which he has retrenched himself is impregnable. One last means of touching him occurs to Louis. But he uses it with reluctance, for appeals to the feelings have always seemed to him intolerably gross.

" How can you forget that this house was not only yours but Mother's too ? Don't you see that out of respect to her memory . . ."

To his astonishment, he perceives that he has struck a sensitive chord.

" Your mother ! " the old man exclaims. " I lived with her for fifty years and never once deceived her. How many men could say the same ? "

" I know, I know," answers his son with some emotion. " You have lived an austere life. But it's too late to change. If you had to have weaknesses, my poor dear father, it should have been long ago and not now."

Decidedly, in the arid waste of his father's soul, he has discovered one green spot where a few traces of the past still linger on.

" When I was younger," says the old man, " I should have broken your mother's heart. Now I do no harm to anyone."

There comes into his eyes a look of melancholy that has not been seen in them for many months.

" And yet," murmurs he, " the difference between my intelligence and my wife's . . ."

He does not finish. What is the use of explaining such things to young men who are satisfied with their lot? And yet, if he were to finish his sentence, if he were to add only a word or two, who knows that he would not break down the proud assurance of this son who is so cruelly attacking him? "Between my intelligence and my wife's . . . My wife Reine—fair-haired, childish Reine, with whom I live a life of elegance and boredom . . ." But this wound of Louis's is so secret and has been so recently recognised, that his thoughts recoil from it. Such an avowal can only be made, even to himself, with all the precautions of reserve and grief. What would be gained by flinging it into this painful discussion, handing it over to an old man who is not interested, exposing it to the harsh light of day? And he represses the two or three words, the semi-confidence which might perhaps bridge the space between his heart and his father's, thrusts them back into the shade in which all that he will never say lies sleeping. Instead, he risks one of the arguments with which he sometimes tries to school himself.

"When a man has had the courage to impose a discipline on himself, then surely, if only out of pride, if only not to contradict himself . . ."

It is over. The thread is broken. The old man begins his mute gesticulations again. Louis speaks in vain of Ménerba and her insulting behaviour to Jourdaine; he is powerless against such tactics. Then he grows irritated; he tries not to raise his voice. His father crouches further and further back in his chair, and now the waving of his hand means not "I am deaf," but "Be quiet! Leave me! Go away!"

"We don't want," cries Louis, at the end of his patience, "to do anything to pain you, but if you force us to . . ."

The hand stops. They both face each other motionless.

Then Louis finishes his sentence:

"Don't be surprised . . . if we take steps to defend ourselves."

No answer; no movement. He was intending to formulate

the conditions of his ultimatum, but prefers to make one more attempt at conciliation.

" Don't you think a united family like ours . . ."

The same silence. This time he loses his temper and rises abruptly.

" Very well then. Good night."

But there is no sign that he has been heard. Then, like a man accustomed to being obeyed, " I am speaking to you ! " he cries.

And he suddenly remembers an impulse of furious rage which had seized him one day when Laurette, aged two, was having a fit of naughtiness. He was frightened of himself on that occasion. He never intervened again. He can only speak to reasonable beings. He had better go away ; there is nothing more he can do here.

XVII

WHEN A little wind, damp and mild, blows from the south-west, bringing rain in its wake, it fills the valley, especially in the evening, with the sharp, rather melancholy smell of the charcoal fires lighted by the forest wood-cutters—a smell of hot ash and moist embers, which, unable to rise through the warm, heavy atmosphere, sinks and settles in the folds and hollows of the ground. No other smell, not even that of fallen autumn leaves, is able to stir certain hearts with so sweet and aching a sense—one man, because of the burning weeds that used to smoke of evenings round his home, another because, as a soldier, forlorn and far away from all he loved, during the days he thought the most miserable of his life, the same smell had risen from the branch-covered dug-outs, in woods laid waste by the war. . . . " The weather is going to break," thinks Proult, sniffing the soft warm air. " It will rain to-morrow," thinks Nicholas.

The meadow where he stands and raises his eyes to the cloudy sky, is the farthest away of all those that belong to the farm. It is surrounded on three sides by the forest, and weeks may pass without anyone's visiting it. There, at any rate, Nicholas is certain that no sound from Saint Saturnin can reach him, neither the mooing of cows, nor the shouts of men, nor even the shrill whistle that tells him he is wanted. This bit of pasture has been neglected on account of its poor soil and isolated situation ; it is overgrown with thistles, which ought to be cut before they seed. Nicholas has set to work at the beginning of the afternoon, and the monotonous job has slightly calmed this morning's irritation. For William Colombe, so as not to be dependent on Richard, who is in his son's pay, has engaged a new chauffeur with a hired car. No further control can be exercised now over

the old man's outings. A stranger has been introduced into the midst of the household, and perturbation reigns among the servants ; even the staunchest will certainly talk imprudently or break into open revolt against intolerable spying. . . . Nicholas, after taking the first necessary steps at home, has gone away as far as he can. He has already cleared three quarters of the meadow. He wants to tire himself out—his arms and his ill-temper. And he has sharpened his scythe so often that it has lost its edge. He sits down on a grassy knoll ; under his damp shirt, he enjoys the feeling that his shoulders, back and legs have worked. The warm wind brings the smell of the charred heaps of wood even to this tree-sheltered spot—the faint, melancholy smell.

" In ten years' time," he thinks, " if men didn't keep them under, the thistles would grow and multiply. The foolish grass would be reduced to smaller and smaller patches. And in the end, the whole earth would fall into the power of the magnificent brigands I take such trouble to persecute."

But now that his thoughts have escaped from the daily rut, they are not to be confined by the narrow horizon of ten years.

" In my country," he muses, " there are only two kings—the oak and the fir. With the lapse of centuries those two alone might stifle all the other races, which subsist, thanks only to the help of man. In places, a few islands of beeches might survive ; a few chestnuts in poor soils and a few elms on the edges of the forests. But the fir and the oak alone would have nothing to fear from any peril and their dynasties would hold eternal sway, or at any rate until the glaciers returned to this quarter of the globe. . . . When it's a question of reigning for a geological period, it's worth while taking a little trouble and hustling everything else out of the way."

He knows that when he gets back to the house, he will see nothing but gloomy faces. The times are past when he

was greeted with " Good evenings " which meant, " Welcome, kind master ! " He is told that Jourdaine is waiting to speak to him in his study, and goes upstairs with some apprehension.

" At last ! " she cries.

What new misfortune is she going to announce ? She hands him a letter. It is in Amédée de Sinnis's handwriting.

Your note has settled it. The Belgrade post was vacant. People say it's possible to live there without much money and even to economise. You needn't think I hesitated long. It's strange what a number of ties one can break in the course of an hour and how cleanly one breaks them. I have just received my appointment and am requested to join as soon as possible. I am only waiting for you to shut up the house here and decide what furniture it's worth while taking away. I don't think you care much for anything we have bought in this place.

In spite of your saying so little, your few lines betrayed more than you thought. I refuse to allow you to carry on a struggle in which your dignity is the chief sufferer. The worst that can happen will not be so bad as the humiliations you are subjected to. I will write to your brothers to take on myself the blame of your leaving—if they have the courage to blame ; and if they try to detain you, you can allege the frailty of my good intentions ; it's a score on which, unfortunately, they will be only too willing to believe you. Don't think it over any more than I have thought it over myself and come back to London as quickly as you can.

Nicholas thinks he has achieved a great deal in refraining from a too obvious grimace.

" Then when are you leaving ? "

" It's too late to-night. To-morrow morning by the first train."

She evidently expects a word that will do justice to the noble behaviour of a man who has been too often judged deplorably frivolous ; but at this moment Nicholas has very little concern for justice.

" My poor child, how much you care for him ! "

"And I'm right, since you see he cares for me."

"It's not astonishing," goes on her brother spitefully, "that he's a success in society, for with his tailors' help, he's fairly good-looking. But when he's undressed . . . I've seen him bathing. . . . He must have wonderful qualities—or else women must be blind to forgive him his knees and his collar-bones. Seriously, Jourdaine, his ribs are unbelievably scraggy!"

She is too happy to be angry.

"Oh, Nick, how disgusting you can be!"

"It isn't my fault," he answers sombrely. "I live with animals.

"I think," he adds, "I shall copy you in a day or two. I shall send the children for the time being to Reine's. Oh, to have a little peace! . . . Have you told them downstairs you are going?"

"I wanted to speak to you first."

"Then . . . supposing you said you were only going away for a week . . . out of consideration for all those poor people who have stuck to us. They've already had their dose of bad news this morning."

She would have been ashamed to cover up her flight with such a shabby lie; but if she may look on it as a charity, what a burden she is free of! At last she will be able to think of something besides the fear of those good-byes.

"I don't know what I can be thinking of," she says. "I forgot to tell you the most important. Cibar came this afternoon. Babet declares it was he. Father saw him in his room with Ménerba. And she went with him to the front door when he left. It seems there was no end to their talking and their handshakings. A pair of old friends! It's all as clear as daylight now. It was he who placed her here."

She has said good-bye to everyone—in the garden, in the farm, in the kitchen. No one has suspected her hypocritical

words of kindness. She is pitied for having other anxieties besides Saint Saturnin. A plain confession of the truth would have overcome her with less confusion than taking advantage of such simple confidence. When the tears rise to her eyes, she very nearly lets it all out to Jenny Cheu. The only person to whom she lies deliberately and calmly is her father, in order not to seem as if she were being driven away by the favourite's insolence. The car has been ordered for early the next morning. Her trunks are packed.

In the country the lights are put out early. When everything in the house seems asleep, Nicholas unlocks the door usually kept shut between his wing and the main building. Armed with a lantern, the feeble light of whose candle is thrown on to the ground, he accompanies Jourdaine into the drawing-room and dining-room. Who knows how soon now they will be closed to them for ever? It is better to put away into safe keeping the few objects to which a certain degree of family piety is attached. With infinite precautions not to knock noisily against a piece of furniture or rattle a key, they unhook a few miniatures, take the diaries of General Colombe's campaigns out of their drawer, and his son's correspondence with his wife out of the morocco case in which it is piously preserved, as well as one or two bundles of papers and an album of old water-colours. During a second raid, they explore the buffet, in which the silver is kept. Where does Jenny hide away great-grandmother Alexandrine's little tea-service? They find it at last, and then collect at random, according as the candle lights them, a few silver-gilt spoons, a napkin ring, a pair of grape-scissors—trifles of no particular value, but adorned with their grandparents' and great-grandparents' initials. Do they really prize these objects or are they yielding to the vanity of keeping the proof that a hundred years ago the family had already given up eating off pewter? The choice soon becomes more difficult. What to leave and what to take? There are the charming arm-chairs worked by their grandmother Clara and her

sister Miss Hoove. Nicholas refuses to touch them, but Jourdaine insists on one at least being saved. And now she wants to save everything. She begs mercy for a work-table her mother was in the habit of using. Walking behind her brother, her arms laden with boxes or china, she is thrilled by the excitement of their midnight expedition, by the fear of being discovered, by the satisfaction of preserving what can still be preserved, of fighting to the last. She has the right now, at any rate, to silence the intolerable voice that has been pursuing her the whole afternoon.

"I am betraying the founders of this house, who devoted themselves, heart and soul, to keeping and beautifying it for us.

"I am betraying the indefatigable old soldier ; I am betraying his brave wife.

"I am betraying his true-hearted son. I am handing over to strangers the place he held most sacred on earth, the place where the young creature he loved died in the flames.

"I am betraying my poor Mother who, unlike me, would have borne humiliations without complaining. I am betraying my father and leaving him in vile hands. . . ."

The lamentable little heap of objects gathered together in Nicholas's room would fill but a very small corner of an old curiosity shop. What is the point of this bric-a-brac, now it has been torn from its setting ? Jourdaine suddenly remembers an embroidered table-cloth over which her mother had tired her eyes for months on end ; but Nicholas grumbles at the idea of another journey. He will ask Jenny to-morrow to fetch the table-cloth. As everything is to be abandoned to the pillage, what matters one relic more or less ?

"There ! You must go to bed now. It's nearly one o'clock. If you can find room in your trunk for any of these things, take them with you. What we must do now is to shake the dust from our feet and not look back."

She knows she will not sleep ; but poor Nicholas is dropping with fatigue and it would be unkind to keep him

up longer. He goes with her to her room carrying some of the things. As he is about to leave her, she stops him.

"Nick, I swear I did nothing to provoke that letter. All I asked was to be encouraged to stay on. You must remember I took his only child away from him. A boy he was passionately fond of. I snatched him away to be out of the sphere of his influence. How can he forget such a thing as that? And yet he wants me back. . . . Try to forgive."

Nicholas answers with forced gaiety:

"Forgive what? You're setting a good example. To-morrow a new life begins."

Ah! what a rapturous meaning those words will have to-morrow when the train is speeding her away! But to-night how sad they sound and lifeless! She listens to her brother's steps going away, and then the litany of her remorse finds her again defenceless.

"I am betraying my brother Nicholas, whose heart is so simple and so complicated, whose life has gained and missed so much. I am leaving him to struggle alone against odious troubles.

"I am betraying honest Proult; I am betraying good, kind Jenny Cheu, who only thought of betraying, and stayed after all.

"I am betraying poor deformed little Babet. . . ."

She repacks her box in order to put in the few spoils she is carrying away from Saint Saturnin. . . . Betrayal after all is less difficult than one imagines it will be. . . . If she could leave without anyone to witness her departure, without anyone on the doorstep to wish her good-bye . . . For—one must be brave enough to own it—would treachery be so difficult without witnesses?

XVIII

SHAKE the dust from one's feet! . . . But those whose work is with the earth, the flocks, the trees, cannot so easily extricate themselves from the mud that sticks to their shoes. They have given pledges that keep them in bondage. It is a fortnight since his sister escaped and Nicholas is still floundering in the same morass of humiliations. In vain he breaks out in his mania for philosophising, " Everything that is happening to us will be incomprehensible in a few years' time. We are obeying the dictates of an epoch that is drawing to an end and will soon be as obsolete as the Middle Ages. Blessed are those who live in hotels, says the modern Gospel, for they escape the tax-gatherer. Blessed are those who sell their goods and turn them into paper, for all the roads of the earth are open to them. And yet I was always more concerned to be free at heart than any of these gadabouts. . . ." Nicholas consents to poverty, but not to abandoning his hay. It is customary to begin cutting the high meadows before Midsummer day, and it is always he who drives the reaping-machine. Once the grass is cut, it can't be left rotting on the ground, and the haymakers can't be left to fold their arms in idleness for want of cutting them another field.

And yet everything shows signs of cracking and breaking. The situation is becoming more painful every day. There must be money in the sealed letters the postman brings, but yet the butcher and baker can't get their bills paid. The whole neighbourhood talks and sniggers. It is not by flitting to his little farm of Cour Marie that Nicholas would escape hearing the complaints. In the big house, all the women servants collect together in the linen-room as a refuge. They would not get their wages either, if Louis did not send what was necessary. They refuse to have any

dealings with the strange chauffeur and confine themselves to taking him his meals. He is to be met with slouching about in odd corners. Nicholas, very much against the grain, counts on old Richard to keep an eye on him and to get him to talk. Now there are not many ways of getting people to talk. When some of the haymakers show signs of drink, Nicholas is afraid to say anything, because the answer he would get would be, " And what about your faithful Richard's nose ? "

If only Louis's news left any room for hope ! But owing to a conflict between certain rival interests, he finds himself on bad terms with his father's bank, and is politely refused all information. The doctors too have set their traps in vain and been successfully routed by the so-called nurse. They had posted themselves in the old man's path, pretending to be the architect's assistants, and tried to get into conversation with him ; but she had evidently scented danger, for, without letting go Mr. Colombe's arm, she had warned him with a little pressure of her fingers every time the talk took a dangerous turn.

Jenny says that she has been asked where the trunks and suit-cases are kept. Are they preparing for flight ? And with what object ? Every day Jenny goes to the loft to see whether the suit-cases are still there. Contrary to what was expected the lady companion no longer tries to irritate ; she is correct ; she keeps in the background. But what does this calm forebode ? Cibar has not re-appeared. Thanks to Maître Ramelle's secret enquiries, it is known that he is more often in Paris than in the country. Is it there he is hatching his plots ? For the premises he has rented in the neighbourhood remain unoccupied and there is even a rumour that some of them have been given up.

The chauffeur, after unexpectedly refusing an invitation to the village inn, finally admits that he has received orders not to absent himself.

Is a midnight flight being planned ? Is it William Colombe's own idea or are they trying to force his hand ?

If the old man gets away, there is every chance the gang will not leave him till he is either dead or completely senile. Now it is difficult to put any efficient obstacles in the way of his flight. An injury to the car may put it out of use for a day or two. Richard and Nicholas look at the machinery and decide how to tamper with it.

In the meantime, people's nerves are getting on edge. Jenny says and repeats that steps are to be heard at night round about the house. In order to calm these absurd fancies, Nicholas sends every evening for the farm dog, Julot, a big, black, rather alarming mastiff. He himself sometimes gets up at two or three o'clock in the morning to go the rounds. However dark the night, he can find his way with certainty by feeling the trunks of the trees, and as his fingers leave the moss of one tree-trunk, they go on to the next without a moment's hesitation. When in days gone by, he used to keep a watch for poachers, he had grown accustomed to these silent rounds, in which a man can hardly hear himself walk ; enveloped in the night's immensity, he is hardly present in his body, which becomes as unsubstantial as a phantom. If he does but stand motionless, he gradually ceases to feel the invisible ground beneath has feet. Formless, weightless, ageless, he is possessed by some strange kind of torpor in which nothing seems to exist but the smell of the damp air and the faint, suppressed sounds of nature's breathing—the creaking of a dead branch, the dripping of a drop of dew from one leaf to the next, the barking of a dreaming dog in a distant farm.

In moments like these, Nicholas finds he is thinking of himself as if he were a third party, a neighbour, one of those countless beings who slumber in obscurity. " He succeeded in levelling the long meadow by dint of digging two acres a year. He drained Cour Linet with drain-pipes he brought from twenty miles away, because they were better baked than those of Variville. For four years running, he grafted the pear-tree that grows beside the gate and seems to be pursued by ill-luck. . . . Not that the poor fellow specially

cares for that particular pear-tree. But he didn't want to be an amateur farmer ; and now when he tries to uproot himself, it isn't easy. There's something in him that pleads and resists."

He thinks too :

"Not even the slightest breath of wind. No stir, no protest, and we make it a matter of dignity to keep as silent as the dead. And yet those who protest most violently nearly always get the better of fate. It's unlucky we haven't the faith of primitive men—the men who in times of calamity separate the lambs from the ewes, the kids from the goats, and put the mothers on one slope of the valley and their young on the other. Then such piercing cries fill the night, such a wild and agonised clamour rises up to heaven, that the gods perhaps will end by taking pity. . ."

When he goes in, chilled to the bone, and undresses to get into the bed that is still warm, his glance nearly always falls on the calendar hanging on the wall. "How long shall I hold out ? To what date ? which of these numbers will it be ? Shall I be here to tear off the first leaf of another month ?"

At other times the thought strikes him that perhaps Saint Saturnin is already secretly sold. Then he finds it impossible to sleep. "I shall stop here," he says aloud, "till the bailiffs turn me out."

A complaint has reached the post-office, written by the lady companion and signed William Colombe, alleging that letters have been intercepted. Nicholas does what is necessary and the incident seems closed. But another arises. At Maître Ramelle's request, M. de Lamorinière, Nicholas's neighbour, has promised to bear witness, if called upon, to the increasing feeblemindedness of his old friend, M. Colombe. Has he boasted of his willingness to do this, as if it were a public service ? How has the enemy's camp heard of it ? In any case, a letter has informed his wife of a low intrigue which he had hitherto succeeded in concealing.

A paragraph in the paper there has been so much talk about has informed the whole world of this domestic drama, from which the old gentleman will emerge with a decidedly damaged reputation. His defence consists in casting all the odium upon Saint Saturnin. He has just inflicted an excessively painful scene upon Nicholas, who has allowed him to speak almost without replying, so great is his amazement at the things such a man finds it possible to bring out in a moment of panic—insinuations, tittle-tattle, ludicrous calumnies which have no doubt been long stewing in the minds of stupid, jealous neighbours, all the more hostile and embittered because condemned hitherto to impotence and secrecy. And what a flood of disloyalty and insult he feels rising up against himself!

This time the reaping machine has been confided to one of the men for the evening's cutting. Nicholas walks up and down his study. He knows he will soon forget this unpleasant altercation; but what hope is there of his ever again drawing his breath freely in the poisonous atmosphere of this evil-minded neighbourhood? June the twenty-first. The year is on the turn; the days that had been lengthening begin now to shorten. A good date for a resolution! It will not take him more than two days to drive his twenty best head of cattle to Cour Marie, where he can leave them, with his tractors, in charge of the Russian; he can call in the cattle-dealers and sell them the rest of the herd. For the contents of the house, there are furniture removers and depositories. And he will be done then with putting basins on the floor to catch the water dripping from the ceilings! . . . Childish, of course; but except for hunger, cold and death, what isn't childish? As for obstacles, he is not conscious of any. There are none left—or rather, only one—a tiny one—an inopportune little note in his pocket, which came this morning and is from Laurette.

Father and Mother won't tell us anything about Saint Saturnin. We only know that Aunt Jourdaine has been obliged to leave and

that things are going on there which are impossible for you to put up with any longer. But we won't believe that horrible people will be allowed to take the house and the garden and our rooms and all our beloved objects and the old tennis-net and the darling Rat-Hole. I implore you not to give up if there is the least hope, and we shall all be fonder of you than ever.

Tiresome little letter ! Tiresome grain of sand ! So, to have brought this fellow Nicholas to his knees is not enough—there's this little girl as well ! But Laurette will soon be consoled ; she will marry. The cattle-dealer's address is written on an envelope. A blank sheet of note-paper lies on the table. It only remains to fix a day. "Dear Mr. Lefrançois. . . ."

The dinner-bell will be ringing in a moment. Nicholas vows he will not rise from the table till the letter is written. He has already been disturbed twice, and now what's this ? . . . The noise of a car ? . . . No, he won't go and see. And if it's the old man escaping, well, let him go ! It'll be God's will. After all, it's as good a way as any other to be quit of it. He takes up his pen again. "I should be very much obliged . . ."

Perhaps that's someone coming to fetch him ? Or is it the children already ? The door opens and he doesn't even turn round. But a man's voice sounds behind him.

"How d'ye do, Uncle Nick !"

He springs to his feet.

"Well I never ! . . ."

Sunburnt, laughing, wearing his arm in a sling, and with a cloak hanging from his shoulder, Gilbert de Sinnis stands on the threshold, enchanted at the success of his theatrical entry.

"It seems you're all alive still, but that Mother has gone. . . . Don't look at that scarf. It's nothing at all—a bullet that didn't even graze the bone. And thanks to this scratch of mine I've got two months' leave. So here I am !"

His uncle's amazement delights him.

"And you know, for this once, I think your Paradise is perfectly marvellous. How green it is here ! How green !"

Nicholas is still trying to collect his wits :

"Well, I never ! . . . *You*, Gibbie, old boy ? . . ."

PART IV
SUMMER

I

THE VINES only attain their maturity when the year is on the wane. Even the corn reaches its prime, like a weather-beaten man of forty, late in life. The hay-crop alone coincides with the solstice, with the shortest night, with the perfect moment when the year, started on its impetuous course, seems still unaware it must soon decline. Working days that begin with the light, end with it. Anyone who can hold a pitchfork or a rake is taken on to assist the work of the mowing machines. Double rations ; high pay ; every hour is precious. For the hay is not really safe till it is stacked and presents nothing but a slippery back for the rain to slide off. The whole flat stretch of the high meadows takes on the appearance of a strange Saharan village with cupolas gleaming through the evening mist. Standing on the new hillocks that rise from the ground, men heap and trample the hay tossed up to them by the pitchforks. To-morrow the weather may change. Yesterday they managed to put up twelve stacks ; Ivanoff wants to have up fourteen more before sundown. The young officer shall see that he's not the only one who knows how to get through a job at the double ! There has been no need to give orders ; everyone has done his best, and the men seem exhilarated by some vague feeling of expectation as much as by the broiling sun and the fumes of the cider which is no sooner drunk than sweated away.

Is it because Gilbert has said to Babet, " Why are you hiding up there like an owl, old thing ? " and to Proult, " We're not going to let them eat your peaches, whatever they may think " ? Is it because Richard happened to be there when the grandson first made his appearance and said to the old man, " Well, Grandfather, a good old bomb would do less harm than your workmen," to which Mr.

William, surprised by the unexpected attack, had found not a word to answer? . . . Whatever the reason, everyone has begun saying to himself, " He's going to turn the female out."

On the very first evening, as Nicholas was starting on his round, Gilbert had asked, " Why don't you take a gun?"

" Because it's the close season," his uncle had answered.

Upon which the young man had gazed at him in astonishment; then, coming to the conclusion that it was permitted, he had burst out into a hearty laugh.

" And as I've begun to ask questions, how is it that Cibar comes here in perfect freedom, when all that's wanted to prevent him is a pole across the avenue and a man to guard it?"

Nicholas had again begun giving his reasons, but on seeing the queer look on his nephew's face, he had made up his mind to laugh instead.

After spending the morning with his workmen, Nicholas comes to join Gilbert at the edge of the meadow.

" I like your Russian," Gilbert says. " If you had two or three strapping fellows like him . . . How many men can you count on?"

This fire-eater of a boy, thinks Nicholas, will be wanting to make loopholes in the walls next and stretch barbed wire across all the roads; and in another day or two, if the police come to make enquiries, he'll be firing at them. But the time for petty precautions has gone by and nothing is impossible after all, except to play the wet-blanket. Even that old grumbler Richard, who has such a contempt for useless niceties, has not forgotten, in spite of the stress of work, to grease the hoofs of the horse that draws the mowing machine. Nicholas thinks again: What would it have been if Gibbie had been wearing his uniform? There's nothing wanting but the buglers. And we should be having the poultry yards looted and the kitchen chairs broken up to make fires with. Quite right too. Praise be to God for having created chairs with straw and dry wood and varnish. What

omelettes you can cook on their blaze ! . . . He has forgotten that he himself, without knowing exactly why, had pretended just now not to notice, when passing by the motor-rake, that some careless fellow had wrenched the steering-gear. He's a careful master as a rule and this is not his usual way. Then why should it be astonishing if the whole party of them are possessed by a Messianic enthusiasm and filled with a belief in prophecies ? " It's in the papers, Mr. Nicholas ; we're to have a dry summer. So it'll be as well not to be in a hurry with the hay."

In reality, there is no longer a choice of tactics. A decisive turning had been taken when Gilbert, the day after his arrival, had calmly said to the old man, " I'm writing to tell Mother to come back, and that if apologies have to be made, well, they will be made." What had Mr. Colombe answered ? Nothing, declares Gilbert. And as to what he may have thought. . . .

" I'm afraid you'll think me a brute, Uncle Nick ; but how can I help it ? Grandfather. . . . Respect for one's forbears . . . Yes, I know. . . . But you must admit my father hasn't done much to encourage me in the habit. And yet, by nature . . . I'm only just beginning to realise it. . . . If there had been someone I could have had confidence in, I shouldn't have been such an idiot. But Uncle Louis is too autocratic ; and as for you, how many times have I set eyes on you, pray, since I reached years of discretion ? "

" It's true, Gilbert. The days might be counted. . . . Why did I never escape from this place where I'm buried alive, and go and visit you in one of your stations ? It's difficult to understand it now. I know the reasons I gave myself —that life is the same everywhere, that there's never anything in it but what one puts there oneself, and it's not by travelling over the world that one finds what one doesn't find at home. Reasons are never anything but reasons ; and yet, my dear Gilbert . . . and yet those reasons were

not mere excuses for laziness. I don't know how to explain. . . . If I compare myself to Louis . . ."

"I'm boring him with my talk," he thinks. "I'm boring him to death. But I can't bear him not to understand." Nick feels how humiliating it is to try and justify his stagnant life in the eyes of a young man fresh from the fields of glory, who can have nothing but pity for this God-forsaken hole. But if Nicholas really bored him, Gilbert's wound would have given him every excuse for idling away the morning in bed or shutting himself up with a book. What obliges him to get up early enough to join his uncle over a basin of porridge that has been kept hot in the oven overnight, and to follow him wherever he goes, so that the whole day from morning to night is an endless succession of talks ? Nicholas has never been such a chatter-box before. All his theories are gradually brought out, either at table or out walking or in the evening as they wait for nine o'clock to strike, when, dropping with fatigue, they go unashamed to bed.

"You see, Gilbert, a man can excel by performing great actions—he can aspire to what is highest and most exceptional in his nature. But I wonder whether another excellence doesn't exist too . . . a more modest, less obvious excellence. Oh, I'm not proposing it to you. You have better things to do. But I am only an average man. One has the right to be an average man ; it's not heroic, but it's very difficult. . . . I despised myself for it for a long time. Then one day I thought that perhaps just in the centre of the circle, just at the intersection of all the lines, there might be something admirably blended, a kind of maximum, just as light that is perfectly white is a mixture of all the colours. . . . Wait a moment. . . . I know what you're going to say—'the *juste milieu*' ; but it's not that at all. In fact, it's the contrary—the *golden* mean, rather. I don't want to play upon words. It may be ridiculous, but it's a thing I care about too much. In the one case you have emptiness—in the other fullness, the fullest fullness. I'm rather incoherent, but I assure you I'm right. The one is a kind of revolting

neutrality, the renunciation of everything strong—while the other . . . the other is, as it were, the building up of an elaborate structure, something that requires skill, proficiency, the collaboration of every portion of the body, from the brains to the toes. . . ."

He gets entangled in his formulas, but persists :

" And because I'm an average man, my dear Gilbert, I have no wish to take up more room than an average man has a right to. Which is perhaps the reason of a certain slackness I show in defending my superfluities."

And he says too :

" People think that I don't know what I want, or else that my whole conduct is governed by social theories. But it's not true. From time to time, I admit, I open a book of economics, but it almost always sets me yawning, for the most established things in it are so provisional that you haven't time to sit down before you're offered another chair. Economists are people who take no interest in any thing you can't put down in figures ; they judge solely by dimensions, as if a grain of gold were not the same metal as a ton. . . . I have no doctrine as to the circulation of money, but I know what a workingman's day represents, and if I'm asked to pay a day-labourer's wages for one dish, why no, the food sticks in my throat. I'm willing to pay for it, but let others eat it ! "

Gilbert listens attentively. None of his elders have ever taken him seriously like this before. He doesn't know yet whether such talk is marvellous or just prodigious nonsense He feels rather stifled by it ; but there must exist some sort of connection between the ideas he usually takes pleasure in and a man he likes better than he had ever thought he would like anybody.

" How can you endure this monotonous life ? And doesn't it make you wild to be tied like this to one spot ? "

" Oh," says Nicholas, " one gets accustomed to it. I am tied like Ulysses to the mast. You remember the story of Ulysses and the sirens ? He made his companions stop

up their ears with wax, but he himself, the wily old fox, wanted to listen to the song. . . . I consent to living here and to being unbearably spied upon by the peasants and the old woman and the priest ; but I assure you I listen to the song of the sirens without missing a single note."

" And don't you ever want to undo the knots ? "

" Oh dear, Gilbert, don't take comparisons so literally. There's more room in the country than on a boat, and when one tethers an animal, one always leaves it a few yards of cord, so that it can play about a little and indulge its fancies."

II

STRANGE veering of the wind! There where the clouds were blackest and the squall most threatening, the sky suddenly clears, the sun unexpectedly shines again, the happy carelessness of fine weather returns in an almost unbelievable manner. And it is on the other side that panic now sets in. The old man no longer dares go out, locks himself into his room, watches from behind closed windows, and wanders hopelessly in the labyrinth of his obsessions.

"My daughter's coming back! My daughter's coming back! He said he was going to write to her. I had only just got rid of her and now he is sending for her back again. They will set upon me now like so many policemen. First one of them will torture me with questions, and then when I'm utterly exhausted, the rest of them will appear, ready and eager to take advantage of my fatigue, and badger and pump till they have wormed everything out of me. All those children of mine, with their wives and families, to whom I have sacrificed my life, they will all be after me! The whole pack of them! Ruined! Ruined! A man who is cut out for great things is ruined if he lets his family get hold of him by so much as the tip of his little finger. I wouldn't believe it at first. I put my whole heart and soul into making my own people happy. And now they want me to go on slaving for them—for nothing but them; I must toil, I must go on my knees, I must sink to Nicholas's niggardly way of life, to his sordid humility—fool and failure that he is! I must sit down in his beastly dirt! . . .

"What were they going to do down at the farm this morning, the two of them? And now why are they standing there in the garden path? Why are they looking at the branches of the lime-tree? Why are they looking at the trench the workmen have dug?

"Good God, wasn't it enough to have sacrificed fifty years of my life to my wife Elisabeth? Fifty years during which I lowered myself, levelled myself down to her petty virtues, during which she kept me prisoner in her bed, poor saintly woman that she was! And now at last I was feeling I had the right to lift up my head. But here's my daughter coming back, my daughter, Jourdaine Marie Clara—another saintly woman! The saintly women round the tomb, with myrrh and incense, for they're never really at their right job unless they're burying someone.

"And the wastrel, the ne'er-do-weel, the young blackguard, what has he come to do here? For his wound's a sham. Mme Ménerba says he can move his arm perfectly well and that as she was passing by she knocked his shoulder without his seeming to feel it in the least. They must have sent for him. They think he won't be held back by any scruples and that he's got his hand in among the Arabs. A man's life doesn't count for anything in those parts. You put the prisoner into a silo and then as it were, accidentally, forget him. . . . I showed Cibar the loft above the bath-room, but I ought to have told him too of the big cupboard in the yellow room. I must speak to him at all costs. And that cook who goes on saying that nobody knows when he is coming back. Why does he leave me without news? The danger is pressing, Mr. Cibar! and your courage is failing, Rolande Ménerba. One day she wanted me to take the train without so much as a handkerchief or a toothbrush, and now she's hanging back. She says things are not ready yet and that it would be rash to give the alarm too soon. But I can't wait any longer. They have got me in their power. A crime is soon committed. And the days are passing—the precious days. I must get to action. To action! . . .

"I know what you're thinking, my good sir, but it's false! You're quite wrong. You think my hurry . . . But you don't know what a constitution I've got. I've not reached my grandfather's age yet and I've none of his

infirmities. Leave statistics to fools. I have time enough. Don't be alarmed. I have all the time necessary. It's not the fear of what you think that makes me want to hurry, but impatience to be up and doing. For I was not intended for this narrow life in which my wife and children kept me stifling. True, I founded the celebrated Commercial Banking Corporation and the French United Steel Company. In my place you would be bursting with pride, my dear Cibar, and in danger of an apoplectic stroke. (For, between ourselves, you often get terribly red in the face; and I rather suspect you of taking . . . yes, yes . . .) But do you think that was enough to satisfy *me*? To fulfil my ambitions? To give the measure of my ability? Are you by any chance like my colleagues, the excellent folk who never suspected what lay beneath my politeness and kindness? And my saintly wife had no idea either, sweet, short-sighted creature that she was!

" But the deceitful children's sharp eyes have guessed my secret. They are frightened. They whisper in corners. They keep hovering round me. Oh, if they could only kill the germ of life, pierce the egg with a long needle like an abortionist! If they could . . . If they could . . .

" Ha! here comes the governess now! What does she want out there? Why is she wiping her nose? People don't have colds at this time of the year. Is it a signal by any chance? Could Nicholas have seen her from his room? . . ."

III

THE PROPHETS have lied, for it has been raining hard ever since last night ; the hay is well enough on, however, for the weather's ill temper not to be disastrous.

" Come with me to Cour Marie, will you ? " says Nicholas. " I'll lend you a waterproof."

And the two men take the path through the woods in the pelting rain. To right and left, in the places where the stems grow thickest and tallest, the ground under the dead leaves is almost dry. The tree-tops have intercepted the millions of drops ; each leaf is a cup, and under the sheet of clouds whose huge reservoirs are overflowing, a hanging sheet of water is held up in basins of greenery, until these in their turn overflow too. But in other parts, where the vegetation is sparser, the barks are gleaming in the wash of the rain, the tufts of grass have a fresh brightness, the mosses are swollen with moisture and the vapour-laden air is filled with their powerful and musky perfume.

Nicholas steals a glance at his companion, at his brown cheek the rain has made shiny. Does Gilbert enjoy the rapture of the plants ? Is he sensitive to the odours that permeate the moisture—the floating, swimming odours ? Does one ever know what Gilbert observes of the things about him, and what arrests his eye in its quiet survey ? As Nicholas picks his way through the puddles, he thinks to himself, " People are apt to imagine that the most striking eyes are those that can read faces and take the measure of things and have the brightness of perspicacity. Yes, of course. . . . But there are others more striking still, that have no need to look about them, that are not always wondering or seeking the answer to a riddle. . . . The master of the boat at Morgate . . . how calmly his grey eyes rested on the world ! The universe might have belonged to him.

. . . And Jamain, the cooper—taciturn fellow—like a prince expecting nothing from the people who approach him. . . . There are men—in rags, sometimes—who are born princes. You recognise them because their eyes are not perpetually roving from right to left. I have never seen Gilbert look out of the corner of his eyes. If he wants to look at something to one side of him, he turns his whole head."

But the track debouches now into a sloping field of grass, crowded with apple-trees. Nicholas pushes open a gate. Cour Marie is situated in a little dip of ground, and whenever it rains, the water pours down the surrounding slopes and settles in pools among the clods of earth.

"Keep to the left," says Nicholas, "or else you'll be ankle-deep in mud. In old days there was a paved walk, but I haven't the ghost of a notion where it can be now. We'll go round by the stables and cider-press. The house is lower down."

As Nicholas has been running this farm together with Saint Saturnin, for several years past, the house has only been used by a labourer and his family. Built of bricks, with no style about it, nor even the amenity of a little garden, its appearance is so dreary in the pouring rain, that Nicholas hastens to say:

"The building isn't much to look at, and wants to be cleaned up a bit, but it's larger than you'd think."

The big key creaks in the lock and as the door is pushed back, it scrapes the floor.

"No, in case of a retreat, this will be my headquarters."

The living-room is fairly spacious and has been recently whitewashed. Gilbert looks at the rafters, the big fire-place where there are still ashes on the hearth, and says good-humouredly:

"I should be glad to have quarters anything like as comfortable. You'll be dry; you'll be warm; there are panes in the windows. A regular palace!"

Nicholas wouldn't dare own up to having had a sneaking little fear of what his first visitor might say—the first he has

brought to this place—the first he has admitted to pass judgment on the humble setting in which he is prepared to confine his life, though not—so he has vowed—to degrade it. By his use of a military phrase, he has succeeded in tricking the young man's imagination, and this is not very brave either. But Gilbert lends himself to the idea so pleasantly ! He even enlarges on it :

" I don't only envy you your diggings, you know. I envy you still more the way in which you handle your men. You make them do whatever you want almost without giving an order. . . . It's extremely capable. Yes, I admire it. One can see at once how devoted they are to you, and I think you could get from them the total amount of self-sacrifice a Normandy peasant is capable of."

He hesitates a little, and then—hang it all—one can speak one's thoughts aloud before Uncle Nick :

" Perhaps you'll say I'm very stupid, but sometimes I think that's the only measure we have of our value. I count my life worth exactly the price my men would be willing to pay for it, and no more. Well, I assure you, that if it was a question of sparing me a bullet or the stab of a knife, there's more than one of them who wouldn't hesitate to put his own body in front of mine. It's the only thing in the world I'm proud of. I know which of them wouldn't grudge me any sacrifice—even that of their lives. And a life is something, even if it's only that of a poor Arab soldier."

" It's a great deal. . . ." murmurs Nicholas.

And his thoughts revert to his own case.

" Renée perhaps would have flung herself between me and the threat of any danger. Mother would perhaps have risked her life for mine. But except for those two—and they are dead . . ."

Gilbert unbuttons his overcoat, for he is feeling hot, and wipes his forehead. It is the first time he has ventured to bring out into the light of day things that hardly bear saying. He sits down on the window-sill and then decides to go on :

" Only I must admit I take a pleasure (it'll pass perhaps —perhaps it's only a first childish vanity), I take a pleasure in making men's wills give way to mine. I don't know how to say it. I want to be liked, of course, but not so much because I'm likeable as because I'm a good commander."

As Nicholas shows no sign of indignation, Gilbert adds :

" And if I must go on with these dreadful confessions, well, I believe honestly that I'd rather serve all my life as a subordinate than live in a country where there are no masters. Only in what part of the world, in what mountains or what deserts are any habitable places going to be left ? I shouldn't mind becoming a Mussulman. I shouldn't mind living in the Cordilleras or Borneo. I learn languages quickly. And I think I'm not much disgusted by brutes . . . so long as they're *my* brutes."

Nicholas is still standing in the same place, in the circle made on the brick floor by the drops from his dripping coat. Does he perceive how wounding these words are, how scornful of his own way of life, or does he only hear the ring, the accent of the voice—the voice of youth and strength speaking with awkward pride ? He takes a carpenter's rule out of his pocket and unfolds it. But the voice goes on abruptly :

" You ought to come away with me, Uncle Nick."

" Come away ? Where ? "

" Come away. It's true. What keeps you here ? " Nicholas is taken aback by the naïve insolence of the question. He gets out of it by joking :

" Where's the money to come from for buying an estate in Morocco ? . . . Unless you offer me a little garden to dig and hoe in front of your hut ? "

Gilbert remains serious.

" There are other countries besides Morocco."

" But you'd have to be ordered there."

" Oh, there's no difficulty about that. There are never enough candidates for jobs requiring a little pluck."

So much self-assurance ends by irritating Nicholas.

"Which doesn't prevent the first condition of your authority being your own obedience, and if you were ordered to some town or other . . ."

He has not expected to provoke such a violent reaction.

"Never ! Never ! Do you hear ? Never !"

"But . . ."

"I've given proofs of obedience. I went through the whole mill ; I didn't shirk a thing. They defied me to submit to discipline. They thought I was good for nothing—except to hamper my father's career by adding *my* little scandals to *his* little games—though he was so clever at hiding them. The die is cast now. If I'd been left alone, I should have done something else, but the essential thing was to get away from that smell of drawing-rooms and dinner-parties, out of that atmosphere of intrigue and miserable jealousies ! . . . My father . . . you don't know what it is to be a diplomat. The interest of nations indeed ! Eye-wash ! Their protocols, their precedences, their petty rivalries, yes, if you like. But nations ! Oh no ! Confess you despise him with all your heart. Confess it, Uncle Nick, just to please me !"

Nicholas, to avoid answering, seizes on the first side-issue he can think of.

"First of all, I don't know why you insist on calling me Uncle Nick. It's ridiculous."

"What am I to call you then ? Just Nick ? All right, I'm quite willing. Well then, confess, Nick . . . All the same it'll take me a moment or two to get accustomed to it."

Nicholas is so much afraid that Amédée de Sinnis will crop up again that he hurriedly asks :

"What else did you want to do ?"

"I wanted to go to Siam when I was nineteen, as Sir Gerald proposed. But my father vetoed the idea because he said Sir Gerald didn't like yellow boys and wanted to take a white one with him. As if I shouldn't have been able to take care of myself ! Siam, do you hear ? In the mountains, exploiting the teak forests and floating the wood

down the rivers during the freshets. I should have had fifty elephants and as many coolies as I liked. . . . Oh, don't let's speak of it ! "

He brushes the vision aside, wipes the dust off the window pane with his sleeve and turning aside his head, gazes gloomily at the dreary field.

Nicholas doesn't dare question further. He also gazes through the open door at the mud, at the hedge and its wall of dripping leaves, at the prison-like confinement of the view, and at the rain beating down upon it all, looking like the wire netting that shuts in a rabbit-hutch. He is vexed with himself for having brought the touchy boy to this place and for having displayed his humble and contemptible resignation. He tries to keep himself in countenance by using his foot-rule and noting a few measurements in his pocket-book. When he turns round, he meets Gilbert's eye, but to his surprise, the look in it has entirely changed ; it has become almost deprecating, as if there were something he was afraid of saying.

" Nick, you haven't always the same ideas as the newspapers, have you ? . . . Don't you think that in Russia . . . don't you think that they're doing something new there . . . and that if one hadn't got cold feet . . . ? "

" Wouldn't you have . . . any prejudices ? . . ." Nicholas answers. " Wouldn't you mind . . . ? "

Gilbert makes a vague gesture, smiles like a child afraid of being scolded, and then starts looking at the rain again.

IV

As SOON as the children succeed in escaping from their lessons, their one idea is to find Gibbie. One might almost suppose Miss Barge lets them take flight on purpose, so that she may follow them in the same direction. Lise and Jacquou see him coming upstairs with shrieks of joy.

" Hullo ! Gibbie ! Hullo ! What have you got there? What's in that big parcel ? "

But he won't let them cling round his legs.

" Be off with you, great Scott ! "

The children think it's the beginning of a game, but he slips into Nicholas's study and carefully locks the door behind him.

" Here, Nick, here's the stuff ! "

He opens the newspaper parcel and cautiously pulls out one or two long strips of material stuck all over with spikes like a dog-collar.

" When these little affairs are stretched across the avenue, there'll be no fear of a car's going over them. We'll fix them to-night when it's quite dark and we shall be safe till to-morrow. Your Richard scratched his fingers horribly sewing them, but there was no stopping him. As for the watchers, they're all clamouring for the job. They're miserable that I only want one at a time. I've doled out the whistles. They've never known such a joke and if Grandfather gets away . . ."

" It's not a joke," says Nicholas crossly. " It's not a shooting party ! "

" No, no," says Gilbert, " of course not. You may be sure they'd be quite as eager if we asked them to do something much more difficult. They're indignant—that's all. And if they were to come across Cibar alone in a dark corner . . ."

Nicholas folds the spiked serpents up again in the newspaper.

" After all," he murmurs, " even Chamondot would be on our side perhaps, for the sacred rights of property are at stake. But it's a proof they think we're in a bad way."

There is a first alarm that afternoon. The chauffeur has been seen taking out his car. So, according to plan, Richard, with a fag in his mouth, finds it necessary to get a pair of pliers out of the garage.

" Going for a drive ? With the old man ? The weather's going to change, though."

But the man answers that he is going alone, that his brakes want something doing to them and that he won't be back till to-morrow evening.

Although there is no danger for to-night, and although it has begun to drizzle, Gilbert cannot resist the pleasure of laying down the strips before he goes to bed. They are fastened by stout nails into the bed of the road on each side of the avenue and lie close to the ground across it. Ivanoff will clear them away at daybreak, so one will be able to sleep in peace.

But about midnight Nicholas wakes with a start. Someone is calling him. He runs to the window.

" Is that you, Proult ? What's the matter ? "

" The dog's been poisoned."

" Julot ? "

" He has fallen dead just outside my door."

" I'll dress and be down in a minute."

While he finishes dressing, he turns on the light in his study, where Gilbert is sleeping.

" I'm going down to see what's up. It seems someone has given Julot a dose of poison. Are you awake or not ? Julot, the black mastiff ! "

Downstairs in the garden, Proult explains.

" In the middle of the road. I very near missed seeing him. Most like he didn't die at once, but managed to drag himself there. Put on a hat, sir. It's spitting. Would you take a lantern, perhaps ? "

The gardener's house looks on to a short cut that crosses

the orchard and leads to the farm. The dog is lying on his side, his legs already stiff, and seems to have fallen while trying to get to his kennel. Nicholas feels the animal's wet coat.

" He's been dead some time. Feel ; he's quite cold."

Armed with the lantern, Proult examines the path.

" Here's a proof he was coming from the big house. Look at the marks. See, he must have fallen once before, just there, and got up again. The ground's covered with marks."

Gilbert has joined them. The sight of the dead body puts him beside himself.

" It's that woman ! To poison a dog like that ! And let him linger too ! "

" Is it revenge ? " says Nicholas. " But she must have known she'd be suspected. . . . And why to-night in particular ? "

Proult lifts the dog's body up by the paws and puts it on the grass.

" Better keep a look out," says he. " I don't mind not going to bed, for one."

The three men walk towards the house. Nothing suspicious at the garage. But when they turn the corner they see a light at Mr. Colombe's window.

" He often doesn't put the light out," says Nicholas.

They stand still a moment, puzzled, looking at the rays of light filtering through drawn curtains from a window on the first floor.

" I'll go and see," murmurs Gilbert, as they draw near the front door.

Nicholas follows him.

" You can't get in by that door. It's always bolted at nine o'clock. You must come round by mine."

But Gilbert has gone up the three steps and tried the handle. The door opens.

" That's odd," says he. . . . " Give me the lantern and wait for me here."

" Don't tread on the seventh step of the staircase," whispers Nicholas ; " it creaks."

Gilbert goes up the stairs cautiously, but just as he reaches the landing, he fancies he sees something moving in the glimmering light cast by his lantern. The folds of one of the long curtains attract his attention. He goes up to it and sees a grey dressing-gown. With her dishevelled locks escaping from under a handkerchief tied over her head, Jenny is barely recognisable.

" Oh, is that you, Jenny ? "

She can hardly speak, she is so frightened.

" I thought," says she, " I heard a noise . . . so I came down to see."

" Did you shut the front door this evening ? "

" Yes, as usual."

" Someone has opened it again. The companion woman —is she in her room ? "

" No, she hasn't gone up yet."

" Are you sure ? "

" Her door always makes a noise and I wasn't asleep."

" Then she's in here ? "

" I can't hear anything."

For many a long year, the remembrance of Jenny Cheu's appearance in her night attire will be a subject of merriment. But this is not the moment to enjoy the spectacle. . . . The carpet is thick. Gilbert goes up to his grandfather's door. He wonders why the keyhole looks so bright, and suddenly goes back to the old housekeeper.

" Don't they lock themselves in as a rule ? "

" Yes, always."

" But do they take the key out of the lock ? "

" No, they just turn it."

" The key's not there now. . . . It looks as if the door had been locked from the outside and the key taken away. . . ."

" Perhaps with a ladder . . . ? " suggests Jenny. " Don't you think you might have a look ? . . . If you put it against the wall very gently ? "

" That's an idea. I noticed the curtains weren't very well drawn."

Gilbert hurries down again. The two others are still on the doorsteps. He tells them what he has seen and Proult runs off to fetch a ladder.

"That story of the car !" says Nicholas. "Were the brakes really out of order ? You must take care not to make a noise putting the ladder against the wall."

Proult has had the same idea, for he brings a sack to put over the ends. The ladder is propped carefully against the window-sill and Gilbert goes up. He has barely reached the top when he shouts out :

" There's no one there. The bed's not been slept in ! "

It is all clear now. They must have left the house without being heard and picked up the car on the road. Nicholas, as his custom is, begins to curse and swear.

" No possibility of catching them up now. We have wasted three-quarters of an hour already and they may very likely have been gone a long time."

But Gilbert refuses to accept defeat ; in this case defeat would be particularly absurd, because of all the precautions he had taken to prevent it.

" There's no knowing. We must try. Is your car ready ? They may be delayed by something. There's no train at this time of night, is there ? Then perhaps they'll make straight for Paris. That'll give us time to catch them up. What ways are there of getting on to the road, besides the avenue ? "

Proult suggests that the end of the avenue would have been a bad place for the car to wait because of a small house standing close by. But there's the path through the wood and also the Clock Tower road.

" Then we must follow up all the tracks. . . . Look alive, Proult ! Run to the farm and wake up the whole lot ! Tell them to take their electric torches and their whistles ! . . . You, Nick, to your car ! Quick ! "

When he is left alone, Gilbert laces up his boots, for he had slipped them on in a hurry. The little drops of rain on the

hot iron casing of the lantern on the ground beside him evaporate with a hissing noise. After a few minutes, he begins to hear the sound of clogs and hob-nailed boots hurrying to the spot. Lights appear here and there. Two men arrive in their shirt-sleeves, they have made such haste.

" You, Ivanoff, take half the men and go by the Clock Tower road. I will take the path through the wood. If anyone sees anything, he is to blow his whistle until everyone collects. . . . And you, Richard . . . are you there ? You must go and take up the spiked strips we put down in the avenue between the third and fifth trees, and then go to the car. Mr. Nicholas will wait for me in the road where the path through the wood joins it. . . . Off now ! At the double ! "

Nicholas had not been expecting a long night drive. He loses several minutes getting his car ready and Richard joins him just as he is at last leaving the garage.

" Quick, Richard, take your coat and jump in beside me."

But the man suddenly stops running and makes a sign with his hand.

" The whistles, Mr. Nicholas ! The whistles ! "

Nicholas silences his motor, and sure enough the repeated noise of a whistle is heard in the distance.

" It's coming from the wood. Quick ! We'll take the road."

It does not take long for them to reach the end of the avenue, turn the corner and skirt along the edge of the forest. They hear the whistles again and stop at the beginning of the path. A few yards off, in the undergrowth, shadowy figures are seen by the light of the lantern. Someone runs up to the car.

" They're there, Mr. Nicholas ! "

At the same time, the men who had started down the Clock Tower avenue and who have also heard the signal, now appear, all breathless.

" They're there, a little way off, with Master Gilbert. We

almost missed seeing them. They were hiding behind a bush."

Nicholas goes up in the rain to what he supposes must be Gilbert's lantern. He recognises too the bursts of his angry voice.

"To poison Julot! How had he hurt you? Filthy! Filthy!"

"Look," he adds, as Nicholas comes up, "there's the poisoner! Doesn't she deserve a bullet through her head? Just look at her!"

He raises his lantern and casts the light on to the woman's face, where drops of rain from her dripping hat are trickling down like tears. But Nicholas has just caught sight of another face, looking distraught in the darkness. He turns aside Gilbert's arm so that the light falls on the old man, who shrinks back and puts up his hand as if to ward something off. Is it the light that dazzles him? Is it the fear of being struck? His collar is a soaked rag; his coat is streaming.

"You'll catch cold," says Nicholas. "You must come in at once."

Silently, with chattering teeth, old Mr. Colombe still looks towards the road as if hoping for some impossible salvation. He is surrounded; he is betrayed. His car has not come. There are men all round him, with heavens knows what evil designs, ready to spring on him, if he takes a step.

"But, my poor dear Father," says Nicholas gently, "where did you want to go?"

He does not deign to answer. The immense effort demanded of his weakness by this midnight flight, collapses in overwhelming disappointment; and the eyes alone in his lifeless face betray his grief and despair.

Nicholas takes him by the arm. Were his father to object, if only by a sign of his head, he would not venture to use force and would let go the drenched coat-sleeve. But, shivering with cold, wet with standing in the rain, Mr. Colombe is too much exhausted to make the slightest struggle. The

farm-labourers draw back on each side of the road. Richard turns the car. The old man has to be lifted on to the step. He does not resist, but neither does he help. Let them do what they like with him !

Half an hour later, he is in his bed, surrounded with hot-water bottles. Jenny gives him a hot grog, feeding him with a spoon, for he is trembling too much to hold the glass. He pulls the bed-clothes up to his chin. The worn-out body is in such a state of distress that nothing can bring it any comfort but a little warmth. Even when at last he falls asleep, he still goes on trembling.

When Nicholas is able to leave the room, he finds all the lights turned up on the stairs. He goes up to the floor above. Three or four men are posted in the passage. Gilbert comes to meet him.

"She refused to pack her trunk, but I threatened to call Babet to empty the drawers. So she gave in. As a precaution, to make sure she wasn't going to barricade herself in, we took the door off its hinges. For that matter, we aren't in a hurry, for it's no use taking her to the station till it's time for the first train. Be easy ; no one's going to touch her. If she has to be carried to the car, we shall lift her on cushions. Everything leaves a mark on fat women like her and she mustn't be able to show any bruises. She let fly at us with a vengeance, but all the same, she wasn't able to get the better of the men. Such revelations, my dear fellow ! You'd never have thought it of Proult—mild, worthy, family-man that he is ! He brought out a collection of obscenities, compared with which your and my vocabularies, my dear Nick, are the language of young innocents. But the funniest thing was the two old women, Babet and Jenny, posted at the corner of the passage. Every now and then, they poked round a head. I vouch for it they didn't lose a syllable."

Nicholas casts a glance into the room. The trunk is

packed. The woman is sitting on a chair with her back turned.

"I think," says he, coming back to Gilbert, "that she'll go without making a fuss, for she must want to put the things she's making off with in a place of safety."

"Of course; we ought to search her trunk."

"Oh no; leave it alone."

"All the same, I should have liked to set the boys at her. She hasn't paid for Julot."

And, as a matter of fact, the departure takes place without a hitch. Ivanoff gives Mme Ménerba her ticket and her luggage check. He doesn't leave her till he has seen her settled in the Paris train.

In the meantime, everyone has something to say. It finally comes out that Pernet had seen the hired car standing by the road-side for two whole hours. What Pernet was doing in the wood at that time of night is not so clear. But Pernet understands quickly enough that the service he has done is worth absolution for a great many snared rabbits in the past and a great many more in the future. For when he saw the chauffeur waiting on the road at midnight with all his lights out, he guessed sharp enough, he says, that something was up. "You clear out of this," he had said to the man, "or I'll give the alarm!" So at last he had driven away and only come back when it was too late. Proult, however, has no intention of letting Pernet's glory put his into the shade, for if he hadn't woken up Mr. Nicholas . . . But Richard, in his turn, wants his share of the limelight.

"If you hadn't come in to drink a cup of my tea," he says to Proult, "would you ever have had to go out to . . . ?"

V

CIBAR's counter attack cannot take place for a day or two. Will he come in person? Will he try to get the old man to lodge a complaint of assault and unlawful detention? The chauffeur has not re-appeared. Have the gang given up the game or are they preparing new tactics? It remains to be seen. A telegram comes in the morning, but only from Jourdaine to say she is arriving the next day. There is a letter too from Laurette—examination passed with distinction—grand plans—medical degree—wants Uncle Nick's advice—can she come to talk it over? Laurette is answered by a jubilant telegram. Decidedly the luck seems to be turning.

Gilbert wants to set to work at once to pull down the scaffolding and make a bonfire with it. Nicholas has great difficulty in saving the builder's material, and only succeeds by abandoning a dozen or so faggots of wood. The farm-hands dress one of these up in an old skirt and set fire to the effigy in front of the kitchen. In the meantime, the old man seems calm.

The old man seems calm, because he is still terror-stricken. What have they done with the woman they have carried off? The woods are big. Would even the best sleuth-hounds discover a grave carefully concealed by ivy and dead leaves? And now it is his turn.

In order not to arouse suspicion, he throws away part of the food Babet brings him and eats only a little chocolate. He tries to write, but falls asleep. It is not till evening that he emerges from his torpor. With the approach of night, his fears increase. Mme Ménerba took away the key with her when she locked the door, to prevent their flight from being discovered too soon. How did the wretches manage to pick the lock? Impossible now to make the door fast. Even

that slender protection cannot be counted on while he is asleep.

He sends away his dinner untouched, declares he wants to sleep and begs not to be disturbed again. As soon as Babet has turned her back, he tries to grapple with the chest of drawers, in the hopes of pushing it up against the door; but he fails to shift it a single inch. With extreme difficulty, and after endless struggles with the rugs, he does manage however, to push the table against it. Then he collects the stools and chairs and piles them on to the table, together with all the fragile objects he can lay his hands on, such as glasses, water-bottles and so on, so that they may break with a crash if anyone tries to creep into the room surreptitiously. He has spent the whole day in his dressing-gown and decides to keep it on and not go to bed. He won't be put an end to like a hare in her form. He will remain all night in his easy-chair facing the door. With his hands on its arms, listening intently and ready at the first sound to rise and affront the peril, he awaits the accomplishment of his doom.

And now, sure enough, a man's hurried footstep is heard on the stairs. Someone is coming. Someone knocks sharply at the door.

"Who is there?" calls out Mr. Colombe, his forehead bathed in sweat.

"I, Louis."

"What do you want?"

"I want to speak to you."

The voice is stern and harsh.

"I want to speak to you at once."

The handle turns but the door immediately strikes against the table.

The old man has risen to his feet.

"You can't come in. Say what you have to from where you are."

The voice answers sharply:

"They are things that can't be shouted in the passages."

Another violent push at the door, but the legs of the table catch in the carpet and it remains immovable.

"Damn it all! Take those fortifications away!"

"Not till you've said what it is you want."

"I want to know first of all who Marchemont is."

"I don't know any such person."

"You do, for you've sold him your Banking Corporation shares."

"I haven't sold anything."

"It's not true. They're your shares. The numbers have been identified. Good God! Must I break the door in?"

His father has taken refuge near the fireplace.

"Don't attempt to come in," he cries; "or I swear you'll not get a single word out of me!"

"Then come nearer yourself! Explain!"

"My affairs are no concern of yours. They are in good hands."

"So good that the Corporation is now in the power of the banks. They've got a majority at last. Marchemont is their man of straw. The old board has been cleared out. We've absolutely no standing left. Do you hear? In our own business! Which you founded!"

What is Louis talking about? What is he up to? What does he want to be at with his stories?

"Do you hear me, yes or no? And yet you know the banks only wanted to get hold of the concern in order to plunder it, exhaust its reserves. You have spent your whole life consolidating it. Well, in five years' time there'll be nothing left of it whatever. Your fine gentlemen will rake in the fruit of all our labours. It was settled this afternoon. Are you beginning to understand and can we talk reasonably?"

The old man gradually raises his head.

"Have they turned you out?"

"They offered me a sinecure—which I refused. So now I want to know . . . For if you're playing the same trick with the French Steel . . ."

Another shake of the door knocks over and smashes

the water-bottle. Mr. Colombe thinks he hears whispering.

"Who's with you?" he calls out. "Whom are you talking to?"

"To Nicholas. He has the right to hear."

"He hasn't! He's to go away at once!"

The old man forgets his terrors. His frenzy takes another shape. Ha, ha! His sons! He has a hold on them then; he still has arms against them.

"If he won't go away, well, let him hear what I have to say as well as you. I am acting in the interest of great things. I am acting in concert with men who share my views—whom I trust. . . ."

Louis's voice interrupts him.

"You mean Cibar?"

"Exactly, Cibar; and your slanders will have no effect whatever. Ah! They've turned you out, have they? I'm deeply grieved, my dear fellow, but it's a question of things infinitely more important than the Banking Corporation! Cibar understands me; Cibar supports me. He's the collaborator I've been looking for all my life. Whatever he does has my approval. If he has sold my shares, he no doubt had good reasons; and it's perfectly useless for you to spit out your venom. . . ."

Louis's voice again cuts him short.

"Then he has full powers to act in your name?"

"Yes, my boy."

"You've given him a power of attorney?"

"As you say. A perfectly legal power of attorney."

That's a nasty knock for those two sons there behind the door. After a short silence, however, Louis's voice begins again in colder and colder accents.

"May one ask when this power of attorney was given?"

"What does it matter to you? You're only asking because you know I've no memory for dates. But it can easily be turned up, if you doubt my word. One of those stupid women Jourdaine found for me was here. Madame . . . Madame . . . the one who had fishes' eyes."

The two ingrates are decidedly staggered ! Mr. Colombe hears them whispering.

" Don't whisper ! Speak out loud ! "

" Well, my poor Father, at the present moment you've probably not a single penny left in the world."

The wretches have sworn then to do him to death with their cruelty. The old man wipes his face.

" That's enough of your wicked insinuations ! Go away ! "

" We're going, but one word more. Do you know where your Cibar is now ? "

" Yes, I do."

" People say he's not in the neighbourhood."

" No, he's not."

" There's every reason to think he's not in Paris either."

" Let me be ! "

" If he's gone into the country, you might as well say where, as there's nothing against him."

Mr. Colombe supports himself on a chair.

" I shan't say anything."

" The fact is you don't know."

" Yes, I do."

The sons don't scruple now to speak out loud.

" He hasn't any idea," says one.

" It's clear enough," says the other, " that the scoundrel has decamped."

" Go away ! Go away ! " calls out the old man, bathed in sweat.

He is trembling all over.

" It's a lie. You don't understand ! "

And suddenly silence falls behind the door.

" How dare you say . . . ? "

Can the two villains have gone ?

" Answer, can't you ! "

The door is still ajar, but the light on the landing has been turned out.

All the efforts of both brothers will be required to take the necessary steps as hurriedly as possible—to set the law in motion, to prosecute the offenders, to impede their action wherever possible. Nicholas packs his suit-case, with Gilbert's help. Louis sits on the bed in a fever of impatience.

" We shall be in Paris before two o'clock this morning," says Nicholas. " I will drive, so you can go to sleep."

" I shan't be able to."

" You must eat something before we start."

" No, I couldn't possibly."

Nicholas, nevertheless, sends Gilbert to make a raid on the larder. A man who has just received such a knock-down blow must be fed. Louis's hands expend their nervousness in tearing a handkerchief to ribbons.

" If you had seen the faces of the gang while the proxies were being verified and the votes counted and then recounted ! They didn't dare believe in their majority. And as for us . . . One tries to carry it off with a bold face on such occasions, to pretend one doesn't care. . . . In reality, one's ears are buzzing and one doesn't know where one is. . . . A queer feeling, my dear friends ! The office I have gone to every day of my life for the last seventeen years—a place which I had furnished myself, where the drawers were all stuffed with my papers . . . Suddenly after a ten minutes' shaking, as it were in a conjurer's hat, hey presto, the trick's done ! I'm an outsider ! I must apologise for still being on the premises, for not being able to take up my carpet there and then, and remove my chair. . . . And the enraging thing is that it's all for a paltry matter of six shares ! "

Nicholas, who has been preparing his retreat for the last three months, takes it more philosophically than his brother.

" Even if the worst comes to the worst," says he, " a few remnants will be saved. The only thing that matters when a ship goes down is that everyone should be able to find a place in a boat."

" To save one's skin," replies Louis angrily, " is exactly what doesn't matter. My business is to create something. That's what I'm here for. As far as I'm concerned there's nothing else that matters. Other considerations are fit for women and servants. Except in so far as it's productive, I don't care a fig for my life. I don't want it ! "

Gilbert has put a plate of cold meat and some bread and butter before him.

" And then all these lost years, this stupid set-back, this waste of work and time and energy ! . . ."

And the man who has never lost a quarter of an hour in his life mechanically sets to work to cut himself a slice of meat and eat it.

VI

THE SPLENDOUR of July has shattered the last roses. Towards noon the fields are deserted. Ants and beetles take possession of the earth and the air is full of a continuous drone. Men, beasts and even birds succumb to the universal drowsiness ; and life, in the day's fiery furnace, lingers on in a state of suspended animation. What will the morrow bring forth ? What is the presage of the sun's fierce heat falling plumb on to Saint Saturnin and cracking the earth ? For a hundred years the phœnix grows and flourishes in the fullness of life, and then the time comes when its vigour declines, when it must traverse the flames if it would rise again and spread new wings for a fresh flight. . . . The century has gone by ; it has even been overpassed by several years. . . .

Nicholas's first note confirms all that has been feared ; the share certificates have been removed from the bank, transferred to a big establishment and credited to the account of a society no one has ever heard of. A second letter announces that this account too has been cleared except for a few securities which were no doubt considered unsaleable or too compromising.

The police, says the letter, *are to all appearance displaying great zeal in trying to trace Cibar's whereabouts. We are under the impression they know he has left France and are delighted to be quit of a prize blackmailer. But they have laid their hands on Ménerba and she is to be examined to-morrow. Louis fills me with admiration : quick, decided, calm and tenacious—a captain who keeps his head in rough weather. I have been able to help a little by securing him the good offices of one or two rascally acquaintances*

I happen to have in various influential quarters. He is rather shocked, though with the tinge of respect he feels for anything he can't do himself. " Do you happen to have been in the white slave traffic by any chance ? "

The heat is stifling. There isn't the smallest breath of air to cool the streets till midnight. How lovely it must be at Saint Saturnin !

If Gibbie's arm is well enough, I hope he'll amuse himself by shooting pigeons—and taking the car out. I have just laid in a fresh stock of petrol. Whatever he uses will be so much the less to take away when it comes to the move. Empty the cellar. Pick the flowers. In the name of all you hold sacred, Jourdaine, my dear, don't let your young god disappear before I come back. (I knew he was a god because he treated the death of a dog and the death of a man exactly as if they were on the same plane. But you can't see it, because you're blinded by the prejudice that God is an old man with a white beard.) In any case don't worry.

Jourdaine thinks the tone of this letter forced and it disturbs rather than reassures her. Certain persons of importance (they gave their titles, but she always mixes up people in the legal profession) have come to question Mr. Colombe. They ask to do so without witnesses. As she stands on the landing, she hears her father's voice rising in great excitement ; but afraid of being caught listening, she goes back to the drawing-room, where she is obliged to sit down, her knees shaking as though the personages were likely to arrest her on their way out. Instead of which, at the end of an hour, they come to take leave of her with a show of politeness which implies the sympathy due to misfortunes when they fall upon people of a certain social standing. She only begins to breathe again when she sees her father's prostration. After his first outburst of indignation at the impropriety of such an interrogatory, the old man has doubtless been too feeble to hold his own against three men determined not to be put off ; and now he seems to have fallen into a state of extreme dejection.

Two days later, Maître Ramelle turns up, in a twitter lest he should have been forestalled by public rumour ; for this very morning, the police have taken possession of Cibar's domicile. Ramelle, having got wind of the affair, has gone to Mr. Petit, the ironmonger's, on pretence of getting a screw which Mme Ramelle has been wanting these ten years for her kitchen scales ; and from his post of observation in the shop, he has seen with his own eyes the patience of Heaven give way at last to a too long deferred vengeance, and the cook turned out of doors with all her goods and chattels. Providence has even caused one of the creature's parcels to come undone and spill all its contents of brushes, petticoats and slippers into the gutter.

The worthy man is still rubbing his hands at the recollection of the spectacle. Jourdaine wonders whether he is aware of the whole truth. She knows one must never admit disasters until they are irremediable. She tries to keep up appearances even with this old family adviser. Then she has to begin all over again with Jenny and the gardener, for the news spreads like wildfire and everybody at Saint Saturnin thinks that as the law has stepped in, the good old days of peace and comfort will return.

"So now all the bothers are over ?"

"Let's hope so, Jenny, let's hope so."

But it would all be bearable, if it weren't for Gilbert's bad temper. For Gilbert is bored. He thinks shooting pigeons poor sport compared with a man-hunt, even if it had only been after an old man dragging himself along with the help of a stick ; but there is no need now for sentinels and beaters, as the old fellow seems to be reduced to complete impotence. Gilbert talks of going to join his uncles in Paris ; sometimes he disappears for the whole day. Jourdaine tries to persuade herself that the suffocating weight she feels oppressing her is caused by the uncertainty of the future, by the twilight that is closing down over Saint Saturnin ; she will not acknowledge her courage as

being undermined by her son's cool and casual kindness.

" I do hope, dear boy, that something will be saved out of it all. I know I've always been improvident. We'll put your share aside at once."

With what an air he raps out :

" I never wanted any of it ! "

She won't admit to herself the reason of this hostile tone. She shuts her eyes as much as she can ; and Gilbert himself is only dimly aware that his exclamation means, " I don't care what *I* lose as long as none of it goes to my wastrel of a father, who has got hold of you again."

So Nicholas's return is looked forward to as a godsend.

" He's coming in the morning, by the twelve o'clock train. We shall have news. He's bringing Laurette with him. She wants a change in the country."

As for news, Nicholas has none they haven't heard already. There is every reason to believe that Louis's situation in the French Steel Company is undamaged. Some of the house property has escaped too, no doubt because Cibar did not know of its existence ; but it is not of much value. Nicholas seems in the highest sprits. As Mr. Colombe does not leave his room, they all lunch together in the dining-room of the big house. The two men never stop teasing or complimenting Laurette, who is by no means too shy now to hold her own. It is almost impossible to recognise the little girl who left last winter in this lovely young creature, blossoming out into the charms of womanhood.

The drawing-room blinds are pulled down. A puff of heat, beating up from the gravel outside, comes in through the open French window. Jourdaine and Laurette, attracted by the blaze, go out on to the terrace. Then Nicholas says to Gilbert (They are both of them at their second glass of brandy) :

" I didn't want to speak of it before your mother, but it's not possible to hesitate any longer. Louis is the only one of

us whose work is really profitable. The small amount we can still lay our hands on must be put at his service. Saint Saturnin is an encumbrance and we must get rid of it as soon as possible."

"And you?"

"I? Well, I've been reflecting for these last ten days, and I've come to the conclusion, humiliating as it is . . ."

But his efforts to look contrite are a failure.

"That I was a coward," he ends with a broad smile.

"You mean?"

"I could adapt myself very easily to living in a hovel. I have no expensive tastes. But at Cour Marie . . . surrounded by a set of people who will treat me as if I had come down in the world. . . . And then to see the new owner of Saint Saturnin cut my trees down without rhyme or reason. . . . You can imagine what it would be like. . . . The idiot will put phosphates where I know there ought to be lime. . . . He'll let the cows damage the apple-trees, the brute! . . . His mares will miscarry, and when I meet him, the wretch . . . I should have to be a saint, my dear Gibbie, and even a great saint!"

"And so far you're only a candidate for saintdom. . . ."

"I give up the whole job. I liquidate. I start afresh. Anything. Anywhere."

"Hurrah!" cries Gilbert. "We'll go off together!" He puts his hands on Nicholas's shoulders and gives him a friendly shake:

"I knew there was some hope in you."

He gives him a sudden affectionate thump, and runs to the French window, laughing.

"Listen to the news. We've nothing to do now but to pack a thing or two and be off together to Central Asia!"

Impossible to silence the tiresome boy. Nicholas is forced to explain everything to the two women as they stand there on the threshold, bathed in the brilliant sunshine. Gilbert is indignant at their dismay.

"You ought to be stuffed and live in a glass case. There's

no such thing nowadays as being attached to a place. That's all over. Fit for house-martins. Nowadays a man is free. His whole fortune in a suit-case."

Decidedly, there's no pleasure in talking to women. They become sentimental at once.

"But, Nick, your children?"

Gilbert settles it.

"They'll be sent to school. A modern man doesn't want a wife or children."

"But, Nick, the work you're so fond of—your Saint Saturnin . . . ?"

Nicholas hurriedly endeavours to parry the attack.

"We must turn over a new leaf. It isn't nearly as difficult as it seems. Saint Saturnin? What hold has it on me, after all? Oh yes! There's one thing—a deadly secret, known to me alone. Well, I shall now sever this last link and reveal the mystery!"

"Stop! Stop!" they immediately exclaim, without understanding what he would be at.

But he goes on:

"On the right of the road that leads to Maisonneuve, there's a path. After about two hundred yards, it branches. Are you listening? The left fork loses itself almost at once in the copse wood; it is all overgrown and I never let anyone touch it, but that's the one you must take and go through the thicket, until you get to a tiny clearing. Well, it's there."

"What's there?"

"It's there the mushrooms are to be found. How you all used to coax me to say where it was I got the basketfuls I used to bring home! Well, now I've told you. I'm disinherited. The woods are yours now—anybody's; and whether they're sold or whether they're kept, it's all one to me."

They barely smile, standing there piteously, like two beggars their eyes full of tears. And it's the younger who pleads most boldly.

" But father said we could keep the house. . . . You can send away the servants and I'll do the cooking. . . . "

Gilbert tries to put his arm round her to soothe her; but she pushes him away.

" Uncle Nick can't go. It's impossible."

" Why, you little goose ? "

" Because it's impossible . . . Because . . . First of all, because he doesn't want to ? "

" How do you know ? "

She had flung out the words with such conviction that Nicholas thinks best to elude the discussion and take refuge in the humiliation of flight.

" Well, first of all, I must go and see what's going on at the farm."

VII

NOBODY knows whether this state of things is going to last a few days or a few generations; nobody knows whether the future will permit them the boldest schemes or reduce them to the humblest. For the present, parsimonious economy goes hand in hand with wasteful extravagance. Nicholas, who could never be persuaded to go for an expedition, now joins Laurette and Gilbert in all their outings. The last bottles of champagne are brought up from the cellar and in the evening, through the open windows, the piano is heard up to a time of night which, in old days, would have found everyone fast asleep in their beds.

" You'll turn the child's head," says Jourdaine. " It'll end badly."

But Gilbert refuses to listen. He squanders his last days of leave with a candid and unblushing insolence. And Nicholas refuses to listen too. She feels it is time Gilbert left, though it is her brother's influence she blames. And powerless to stem the whirl of excitement that seems to have caught hold of all three of them, the most she can do is to try and prevent the noise of their exuberant spirits from reaching the old man's ears—though, for that matter, he seems to hear nothing. All communication between him and the outer world appears to be cut off, and he hardly opens his mouth.

Once or twice, Nicholas has come across his father without being greeted with hard words, but he avoids going into his room.

" I assure you," says Jourdaine, " that you ought to go and see him for a few minutes every day. He is very low."

When Nicholas shakes his head, she thinks he wishes to evade an irksome task.

" Can't you force yourself to do that much ? " she says, more and more puzzled by this brother of hers whose character seems going to pieces. " It's not much of a kindness. Don't let's look as if we bore malice."

" My dear," he says, and this time his eyes are neither evasive nor inattentive, " it's just out of kindness that I avoid inflicting my presence on him. At last, I see things clearly. I don't know how I can have remained blind so long. You see," he goes on, taking his sister's arm affectionately, " we consider that the love of parents for their children is natural and that the exception is monstrous. But it's an opinion that wants revising. It is perfectly obvious that Father never felt for me what you can call love."

" How can you accuse him of such a thing ? "

" Not only," he replies earnestly, " do I not accuse him, but I think it is the highest praise that can be given him. The highest praise. For he never treated me differently from you two. He never showed anything. Granted that Mother may have helped. But he must have had a rare sense of justice and an admirable control of his feelings. Think what it must be to keep up an attitude of that kind throughout a whole life-time. Now he no longer has the strength to. I don't pretend," he goes on, as she tries to protest, " I don't pretend that he hated me. I wasn't indispensable to him, that's all. And very naturally. If anything had happened to Louis, he would have lost his successor, the pride of his eyes ; it would have been a disaster. And without you, the whole sentimental side of his life would have been maimed. While if he had not had me . . . (don't say no ; you can see I admire him for it . . .) if he had not had me, why (it's not sad, my dear, it's simply human . . .) he wouldn't have felt that he had missed anything at all."

But whilst at Saint Saturnin they wait, drown their cares as best they can, give a rein to their imaginations, indulge in secret hopes of change, desecration and pillage, elsewhere other projects are being formed, cautious calculations, careful provisions.

"You've read the paragraph in the papers about Saint Saturnin, no doubt," says M. Lacour. "The papers are often wrong, but it would be interesting to know what rates and taxes they pay on the house and how many trees there are ready to cut in the woods." On the other hand Mme Lacour wonders whether the console-table with the sphinxes' heads in the drawing-room, is really a period piece.

"The important thing," says Mme de Babant to Comte Lemercier, "is that they shouldn't get us to bid against each other. One wishes them no ill, but they mustn't take it into their heads that their neighbours are going to pay extravagant prices for their benefit."

"I have never taken pleasure in the misfortunes of my fellows," says the county-councillor, "but subversive ideas are not to be indulged in with impunity. God grant that the rumours may be false. Every change brings its risks. Our district might be the loser . . . but you must acknowledge it would not be necessarily a loser."

"I admit," says Maître Ramelle to his future successor, "that my receipts have fallen off of late. But consider all the business that is taken from us by free-lances. And though I foresee nothing of the kind . . . nothing whatever (I say so openly—I say so with my hand on my heart), just think how my average for the last few years would be raised by one single transaction dealing with a very considerable number of acres."

VIII

BUT A LETTER from Louis shatters this vague spell of excitement and uncertainty.

You refused to believe, he writes to Nicholas, *in the existence of the safe to which Ménerba seemed to be alluding when she gave herself away during her cross-examination. It was identified two days ago among the safes belonging to an obscure Agricultural Bank, and yesterday the officials proceeded to open it. I have not yet received the list of its contents, but I calculate that about a quarter of the stolen share certificates have been recovered. Did Cibar have no time to realise them? Was he keeping them in reserve? Mere conjectures.*

The formalities will take a long time, but we shall be able to hold out till then. I have sold my drawing-room tapestry, which will enable you to get along more or less comfortably at Saint Saturnin. Reine takes these small sacrifices with the most charming good humour. I must admit she astonishes me (though I say it who shouldn't) ; but we shall never cease to be surprised by women. During the few days we were expecting the worst, she showed a pluck, a composure, that freed me from my most teasing apprehensions. So much so, that notwithstanding my vexation and worry and fits of rage, I shall perhaps end by looking back on this adventure as a sort of cold but refreshing douche.

You say that Father seems to be getting rapidly weaker. What should we do with him anywhere but at Saint Saturnin? Now that it has become possible, you must try and stick on there as I do here. Our margin of safety isn't wide enough now to allow of our recklessly giving up a position we have so laboriously acquired and handing over our spoils to fatten a set of speculators. To retreat after this rap on the knuckles would not only be cowardly but dangerous. We must try and make good our recovery on the spot. There will very

likely be days when it won't be much fun, but the more difficult a thing is the more it becomes a point of honour to pull it off.

To speak of something else. I might perhaps be able to offer Gilbert something that would give him a better chance of getting on than that silly profession of his.

The letter arrived more than two hours ago and Nicholas has not yet shown it to anyone. He lingers in the farm and then makes up his mind to go home by way of the little terrace that lies on a slope of ground below the house and faces the meadow. Sure enough, Gilbert is there at the foot of the espalier. Sitting on the ground, he is giving his scar a final sun-bath.

" Well, Nick, what have you been up to ? Make haste and take your coat and shirt off. Aren't you ashamed of having a skin as white as a girl's ? . . . What makes you look so queer ? "

" Read that."

Gilbert puts out his hand.

" Bothers ? "

He reads the letter and re-reads it. Then he folds it and hands it back.

" So ? "

His uncle is absently pulling off the espalier some leaves with green-fly on them.

" So ? " repeats the young man, still refusing to admit the evidence of his senses. But let Nicholas keep silent long enough to pull off two leaves more, and he won't be able to refuse it any longer. There they go ! And Gilbert says savagely :

" A stupid question. Of course you're going to obey him."

Although he feels that any prestige he may have acquired in Gilbert's eyes has collapsed at a single blow, Nicholas stands fast.

" Of course, I shan't desert him when he is in difficulties."

" What a good brother ! I admire you with all my heart

. . . Only you might have warned me that all those plans of ours were nothing but fine words."

The sneer stabs so sharply that it takes Nicholas's breath away. At last, however, he answers :

" You didn't think, did you, that I should be mean enough . . . to leave your mother and Louis the job of looking after Saint Saturnin ? "

" But when I arrived, what were you going to do but chuck the whole thing up ? "

Gilbert is the only person in the world Nicholas finds it intolerable to be judged by, and yet he stands there justifying himself before this boy who looks him contemptuously up and down without even condescending to get up.

" I was going to Cour Marie, but I should have been close at hand. . . . I should have gone on doing all I could."

Gilbert's disappointment makes him pitiless. So all the wisdom of the sages that has so puzzled and so attracted him during the last two months leads only to such slavery as this !

" It's a pity," he taunts, " I don't need an assistant. You're really a treasure. No wonder Uncle Louis values you."

Nicholas feels inclined to kick him with his nailed boots. He feels inclined to scarify those bare shoulders, that smooth, handsome chest. But Gilbert slips on his shirt and fastens his collar.

" When does the next train go ? "

He rises.

" As it's Uncle Louis who gives orders here," he says as he finishes dressing, " I can't sail without seeing him. It doesn't mean that I'm thinking of giving up my ' silly profession ' . . . but this energetic man must be listened to, I suppose."

Gilbert thinks he perceives a strange quivering in the eyelids of the eyes that are doing their best not to avoid his own. And this weakness irritates him less than the one he has been the witness of for the last five minutes ; it proves, at

any rate, that his thrusts have gone home. Perhaps he has even carried his insolence a little further than he meant to.

" Come, Nick," he says more gently, " your life at Saint Saturnin was not very lively even before all this. It'll be the same now only shabbier, more depressing."

Nicholas makes a painful attempt to smile.

" If you hadn't caught your grandfather that night . . . *I* thought he was out of reach. . . If I'd been alone I should have probably given up and let him get off. . . . If anyone has saved Saint Saturnin, it's no doubt you."

" Do you mean you regret it ? "

Nicholas shakes his head and tears off another leaf or two.

" I swear," he says, " that if at this moment, by some happy chance, Saint Saturnin ceased to exist . . ."

He stops short, and as Gilbert turns homewards, he walks beside him. " To feel oneself drowning," thinks Gilbert, " and not try to swim ! " But however much the young man's fervour may have been quenched, he cannot sacrifice this affectionate and incomprehensible comrade to a merely intellectual disapproval. He stops to say :

" What I have done can be undone. In the country, when a fire breaks out under the roof, the whole house is destroyed. I'll imitate a short circuit for you which will take in the sharpest, I promise you."

These words are spoken with such heartiness and conviction that it is impossible to doubt their sincerity.

" If I was willing to do away with what is still standing," says Nicholas, " I should take the responsibility myself."

" Then take it."

" Unfortunately, I am not willing."

" But why ? What kind of mysticism . . . ? "

It is Nicholas who starts to walk again.

" Evidently . . . some kind of mysticism. . . . You speak like a child."

Gilbert, for all that, is enough master of himself not to answer :

" And *you* speak like Babet ! "

The story of the safe, Gilbert's sudden departure, and the general agitation ensuing, spare Nicholas the discomfort of feeling all eyes fixed upon him. He had thought of driving Gilbert himself to the station, but he dreads those last minutes of waiting at the door of the railway carriage. It is Jourdaine and the children who will speed the traveller on his way. When they are all in the car, Gilbert goes up to him.

" Good-bye, Nick, old fellow."

He takes his uncle by the arm. The others may wait. After all, the only person who counts is this irritating and likeable idiot. But he can't get out what he wants to express.

" And yet, you know . . . it' a pity ! . . . It's a pity ! " is all he manages to say, almost in a whisper, affectionately, regretfully.

Nicholas shakes his head.

" No, dear boy, it's best so."

And then he adds in a lower voice :

" You would have got bored with me too soon. . . . And now, you must go."

If one really makes up one's mind to stick to it, one must get back to work. Nicholas spends the rest of the day with his men. There are already a considerable amount of arrears to be made up. What a number of things during the last few weeks have been neglected ! In the evening he sits down to his writing-table ; the graph that shows how much milk each of his best cows produces per day, has to be brought up to date. " Nicholas," he muses, " you are born to be a subordinate. . . True, you had suspected as much before, but you are humiliated all the same at having it rubbed in. . . . Here you are again in your rut ; and you were sent back to it pretty sharp. . . ." At other times, he thinks, " All that would be nothing, if that boy didn't imagine he had given me a dressing down."

And his eyes fall on the photograph that always stands

there on the corner of his table—the most living, speaking likeness of Renée that exists. He feels as if he had hardly looked at it for two months

" He's not a bad fellow, my darling, but he goes too fast—like a thorough-bred race-horse—that's all."

The young woman's face is smiling, but as though from behind a veil. And according to the day, according to the look the living man turns upon the shadow, the smile answers him gaily or sadly. " You may laugh at me, my darling. And even despise me for a foolish fellow who has let his head be turned. Oh, yes, you have certainly the right to laugh. . . . You and I used to walk along together at the same pace, and that's why you were my true comrade. . . . But now you've slipped behind. . . . And when I'm not there, you fade away, you grow pale and thin, like some poor little girl they've left without her meals. . . . But he's not a bad boy, and it's not with him, but with me you must be angry."

IX

LOUIS has come to confer with his brother and sister, get their signatures to various papers and agree as to the next steps that have to be taken. Part of the woods must be cut down ; the silver must be sold. But all this might be arranged, if necessary, by letter. Louis is concerned about something different. After dinner, he takes Nicholas aside and pulls out a pocket-book bound in leather.

" Would you look at this ? " he says. " I'll join you in your study later on."

Once upstairs in his room, Nicholas settles himself on the divan. The pocket-book is entirely filled with close, careful, very legible handwriting. Four words, underlined and set between quotation marks, stand alone on the first page : " THE DOOR IS OPEN." On the next, the text begins.

The horror caused me by my father's mental decay will soon wear off. Indeed, I already catch myself thinking of this tragic failure as merely one risk among many. But what will it be in twenty years' time ? It won't be my business then to make philosophical remarks but to look out for premonitory symptoms and to hold myself ready. And where will my resolution be ? Lying forgotten, no doubt, in the depths of my memory, from which I shall have neither the lucidity nor the energy to disinter it. And if there still remains some trace of it, my senile cunning will find means to hold the importunate phantom at bay. What I shall want at that moment will be something perfectly fixed, perfectly definite, not merely a warning, but a barrier, not a piece of advice but a word of command. I must no longer feel myself a chief, free to settle on his tactics and choose his day, but merely a soldier who carries out his orders and goes over the top because it's the hour, in spite of all the excellent reasons he might find for not doing so. That is why I am drawing up these elaborate instructions which I shall read over

every first of January, for I must take care to imprint them on my memory with the more care as it will become more and more to my interest to forget them. I will complete them by noting all the signs I observe in other people of the gradual decay of their faculties; I will try to run to earth all the sophisms with which old age so cleverly cheats itself. I will never for a moment minimise the dreadful liability that must be constantly held in view if the mind wishes to escape in time from the judgment that threatens us.

And first of all, as the most convincing example must be the one we have ourselves witnessed, I will note it down with all its details, not excepting those that affection might tempt me to pass over in silence. I shall always be able to make an equitable re-adjustment in favour of the man. The important thing is to effect some kind of rescue out of what appears to be the sheer disaster of his case. For my incorrigible vanity demands that nothing I have to do with shall ever end in a deficit, that some kind of net gain shall be extracted from everything I touch.

Even before my mother's death . . .

And then begins the catalogue of all those early symptoms of which the true significance was not grasped till later. Then all the phases of his father's progressive insanity are noted with their dates. Nicholas is astonished at the exactness with which his brother has remembered the precise words and made minutes of particular conversations. Sometimes, between an account of two incidents come appeals addressed to himself and imperious rules of conduct.

I must watch myself with a specially jealous eye after every illness. I must keep a sharp look-out for apparently harmless signs, such as spelling mistakes, lapses of memory, obsessions about health. If I ever think the rules I am now formulating ridiculous or futile, it will be the most crushing proof that my judgment is failing. These words must be taken literally and not as mere vague truths. I must not say to myself that after all, I am only incurring the common lot of my generation. My whole object is to save myself from slipping downhill in their company.

Louis interrupts some remarks on his father's behaviour after his unsuccessful flight, to note :

If you have a trustworthy secretary, or better still, if you can count on Nicholas, get him to remind you at regular intervals of the existence of this pocket-book. Mark these dates beforehand in an agenda by a sign clear enough to be recognised, even if you are already beginning to fail. Beware of your children's compassion. Take care not to let them read these lines ; they might destroy them. Perhaps this is what you secretly want ; but I warn you that I see through your little tricks and that I shall never cease from watching you.

As Nicholas finishes reading, he sees his brother standing beside him. Their understanding is implicit and has no need of words to express it.

"You are obviously right," says Nicholas, "only . . ."

"You needn't suppose I haven't gone through all the possible objections."

". . . only when one has become sufficiently feeble-minded for it to become noticeable, one's will has lost its strength too."

"I know, my dear boy ; that's why one wants outside help. It's one of the few occasions in life when one may not be able to manage entirely by oneself ; and if I'm talking to you about it . . ."

Nicholas still holds out.

"The mind gives way in one place but keeps firm in others."

"Yes, of course, I know ! "

"It frays away unevenly. The question is precisely when to use the knife ? "

"If we are afraid of losing the smallest remnant of what is left us," says Louis impatiently, "we are doomed beforehand. Liberty must be paid for. Granted. And if I choose to stand the cost, that's my own affair. I only want to know if I can count on you."

" To do what ? "

" Nothing. Simply to bear witness to what I think to-day . . . and to continue doing so."

" That is to say ? "

" You understand perfectly well. One doesn't want to be carried away by the current without being aware of it. I must have a fixed point by which I can judge where I am. I've a copy of what you've just read. Will you agree to keep that pocket-book ? "

" What for ? "

" There's a blank page at the beginning. Write in it just these words : ' *When my brother Louis reaches the age of sixty, I promise to point out to him every year . . .*' "

" Stop ! Stop ! " interrupts Nicholas. " ' Point out to him every year . . .' We shall either perform the little ceremony with a smile, and it will be perfectly useless, or else we shall neither of us feel inclined to smile, and what you are asking is that I shall present you with a loaded revolver."

" A revolver or the right dose of sleeping-draught ! What does it matter ? Don't try and make out you have any more prejudices than I."

" At any rate, I have that of keeping my word. If I sign a promise to do something, I shall do it—as you know perfectly well. And I suppose that's why you ask me."

" Well, I could hardly ask Reine or my children, could I ? I have some very good friends, who have proved lately that they are attached to me, but they'd think I was mad if I spoke about any such ideas to them. . . . No, when one wants someone one can rely on, there aren't many people to choose from. . . . Then do you refuse ? "

" I want to reflect," says Nicholas crossly ; " the time to smoke a pipe. Damn it all, it's not asking much."

" All right. I'll write a letter meanwhile. Give me some paper."

" And if I don't sign ? "

" If you refuse ? . . . The danger's not so much that the

revolver will be forgotten in a drawer as that I shall take it out too soon."

Louis sits down at the writing-table, while Nicholas walks up and down, his pipe between his teeth. When the letter is finished and addressed, Louis looks at his younger brother.

" If you let it go out, it's not fair."

" You're exasperating ! Write your formula on a piece of paper. I'm not going to have it dictated to me."

The sentence is only four lines long. Nicholas takes the paper and begins again walking up and down like a bear in a cage. Then he goes to the table where the pocket-book is lying, copies the sentence and signs it.

" There ! "

" Thank you."

They start going downstairs again.

" At any rate, don't go and confide all this to any old people," says Nicholas. " They must be left to end their days in peace, poor things. We are really very hard on them."

And half way down, he stops.

" Don't you think there might possibly be some other way ? "

" What other ? "

" A way of combating the cause rather than the effect. It's always more efficacious. . . . If you were to work a little less hard. . . ."

Louis brushes aside this useless exhortation with a wave of his hand.

" I don't work as much as all that. It's a mere legend."

" All right. Let's count the hours."

But Louis is as much alarmed as an inebriate whom one tries to deprive of his drink.

" Please ! I know best what's good for me. Don't you persecute me too, my dear fellow, with all these stories. It's no use. Not the slightest ! I implore you to leave me alone."

Louis's pleading shows so much apprehension, it is the

avowal of a weakness so admittedly irremediable, that Nicholas's falters.

" If you were to begin by smoking fewer cigars. And if on the other hand, you were sometimes to allow yourself a few distractions. . . ."

He may have been prepared for the irony of his brother's smile, but he is surprised by the sadness of the look that accompanies it, and which seems to say with a rather melancholy candour, " You know quite well that such little indulgences are not for me." Nicholas goes on, however :

" I'm not being cynical, old chap. You were always the one of us two who was most like Father, and yet I believe that to-day I'm the one who judges him most fairly. He is paying now for a life of too much restraint, too great severity. To the end he kept too many reserves of energy unemployed. . . ."

" And if he did ? " retorts Louis. " It was that very severity that made the beauty of his character. I see all you see, but I won't have your methods. For there are other ways of standing up against nature's revenges besides your little trickeries. The main thing is to be willing to pay the price. Let me manage in my own way," he adds almost timidly. " I have my own preferences. It can't be helped."

Nicholas attempts no further reply and Louis goes on :

" Everything in life is permissible ; everything, do you hear, everything ! But on condition one doesn't shirk the consequences. People want to have all the advantages without paying the penalty. It's not playing the game. I know there's a bad moment when the time comes for settling up. . . . That's why I asked you for a helping hand."

They go on again downstairs. " Poor old chap," thinks Nicholas, " so straight and genuine ! And so innocently putting his head into the lion's jaw."

And yet a moment later, he feels a kind of envy when he sees Louis taking leave of Laurette. An affectionate kiss, almost in her neck, with a look that lingers fondly on the lovely slope of the shoulder. He knows Louis's partiality

for his daughters, but this kiss is something more—a proud, calm consciousness of his rights—a frank acceptance of the price to be paid for them. And the way Laurette looks at him in return, so confidingly, so admiringly ! That is something too, something that does not fall to the lot of everyone.

Just before starting, Louis says to Nicholas :

" Some day or other there may be a place going in the French Steel Company. . . . Not just yet. . . . But if in the long run Saint Saturnin turned out too much of a millstone. . . ."

" Thank you, old boy . . . but one must try and stick to one's own trade."

" I suggest it," Louis replies, " because, upon my word, the future here seems very restricted."

" The future ! The future ! " says Nicholas. " Evidently, such places as the Saint Saturnin of the past are over and done with. . . . But what about industry ? . . ."

Louis laughs. He has always thought it comic that any doubt should be cast on the conquests of man.

" With or without us, it has taken up its place in the world —take my word for it."

But Nicholas is not convinced.

" The future," he murmurs, " is everywhere. . . where something is really going on. . . All one can say is that we must be ready . . . whatever happens."

X

From Jourdaine

My darling child,

As the days go by, your grandfather is becoming calmer. At first this was a relief, and then it struck one that his eccentricities had hidden a good deal that was tragic, and one thinks with some shame that the bitterest part of real tragedy is that it often has something ludicrous about it. There is nothing now to disguise his state of distress. He is afraid of us but he does not dare show it. He gives way because he has not the strength left to resist, but it's more often than not in the manner of a condemned man awaiting the summons to execution. His eyes follow us so feverishly, so sadly!

He likes me to read aloud to him. To tell the truth he hardly listens. I think the story is like a screen he takes refuge behind. Sometimes his imagination is started by a word. Yesterday, for instance, he suddenly interrupted me to say, " I'm not like all of you. When once I put my trust in a person, I don't take it back." And as I didn't understand at once, he was more precise. " The whole world may bring me proofs against my friends ; it won't make me doubt them." This is the only allusion he has made to Cibar.

Sometimes, as it were defiantly, he murmurs various names of women. I pretend not to hear. Then he adds a little hint of impropriety, but so timidly, so low, that as a rule I hear nothing at all. Louis, who can't even yet reconcile himself to the idea of his father's feeblemindedness, sometimes tries to explain things to him, to open his eyes. But it would be cruelty if he succeeded. I feel sure that a portion of the truth has filtered down to the depths of his consciousness. There are regions of his mind in which he has occasional flashes of understanding. But he struggles with his whole soul not *to understand. And the only thing that keeps him going, poor man, is this childish bravado—the only course he now has left.*

After covering four sheets with writing, Nicholas hastily tears them up. Then he writes a letter two pages long—

which he also destroys. He contents himself with sending Gilbert this note :

I have found the Chinese maxim I couldn't remember exactly the other day. It's by Lao Tse.

" He who, conscious of being his own light, is content to be obscure—he shall be the paragon of mankind.

He who, conscious of being strong, is content to be weak — he shall be the centre of the universe."

XI

THE OLD man hardly leaves his bed now. The last fragments of his intellect, which in the general break-up had still remained precariously standing, now totter and fall like the rest. Nothing is left behind but a crumbled and indistinguishable heap of ruins. Death will not have much to do in order to level them with the dust.

It seems indeed that the end is swiftly approaching and that the mighty hand is about to fall silently and gently. The old man has had several attacks of faintness, and some of them so long that they barely expected him to open his eyes again. As Jourdaine was sitting at his bedside, he had murmured :

" Is that you . . . Elisabeth ? "

Louis has been sent for. But when he arrives late in the day, the wavering life seems to have regained a little strength, to have climbed back a step or two out of the darkness. But they dare not leave the room yet, Louis lingers there. He thinks that when next he sees his father's face, it will be motionless.

Nine months ago it was towards the other bed, the empty bed, that they had turned their eyes. The direction of their eyes is so little changed. That emotion of the past is still so near that it pervades the present. There will be no need to make the poor old man trip up over a hose ; there will be no need to stupefy him with drugs. He will depart of his own accord, harmlessly. His folly has exhausted him so utterly that there is nothing in him now for it to feed on.

The sons and daughters come and go, sit down for a moment, barely speak, and their thoughts travel hither and thither, backwards and forwards from the living to the dead, from those who stay behind to him who is on the eve of departure. And each of them thinks of himself, of the moment that is approaching when the last of the two parents will have disappeared, and they themselves be left to advance towards the unknown bourne defenceless and

exposed. . . . For in that march towards the ultimate unknown, even an infirm old man is still some protection.

Louis Colombe's Meditation

He thought he had taken all his precautions ; he thought the battle was over, the ship come to port. He had no misgiving about the tiny space still dividing him from the goal where no more errors can be committed ; and Life took advantage of that little opening to inflict on him the most exquisite revenge. She made use of his foibles, the jade ! She played upon his virtues. Ah ! she set about it cunningly ! What cruelty to put so much art into fooling an old man ! But in one respect she has failed. She has shown her hand too openly. One suspected a little what lay beneath her appearance of easy good temper. One kept an eye on her, but now it's plain what she's after. Some of us henceforth will be on our guard. She won't fool *us* ! . . .

He was one of those men who like to strain against the collar, who are grateful to the harness if it enables them to pull harder. . . . We Colombes are like that. Well, that's all I ask—to be like that ! Let those who are idle lie down and rest, so long as I'm not asked to rest myself ; and let them enjoy their luxuries. I don't mind. And I'll consent not to despise them over much, provided I can continue to esteem myself, provided my work endures—even though it doesn't keep my visible signature on it plain for all to see (I don't mind about that either) ; but I want my work to endure, to be safe, and may my hands be cut off before I run a risk of spoiling or destroying it ! . . .

What a blow to his pride, if he could see his balance sheet ! Poor man, how he would ask our pardon ! And yet . . . and yet . . . there's much that might be said. Is it really true that he is leaving less than he received ? Hasn't he been judged unfairly, and even monstrously so ? He has destroyed almost the whole of what he created . . . except us ! Except us three, and we aren't humble enough to consider ourselves the least important part of his life's work. We are there,

present and alive and ready to reconstruct and carry on. No fear now that I shall be turned out. I have made my position secure. And Nicholas will be all right ; and there is strength in Jourdaine. We are there and it was he who made us. That's something. We shall carry on and we shall forge ahead. And that really is the only thing that counts. We may have been getting a bit sleepy in our comfortable existence. We were beginning to split hairs. It was perhaps time for us to be woken up. Perhaps it's all for the best. . . . Yes, all. . . . Who knows ? . . .

It's only children who pray for it to be perpetually fine. No doubt the weather would be better if we had the arranging of it. But since we have to take it as it comes, why, all right, we take it. And this short life of ours too, we take it as it comes. You people are a nuisance with your picking of holes and your way of excusing the present by the past. Yes or no, during all these years, barring one or two, was it a fruitful and well conducted life? And are we sure, all of us, to reach as fair a total when we come to add up our accounts? If we were offered a career like his, taking the debit with the credit, shouldn't we do well to accept it with our eyes shut? Then let's thank him while he's still here. We can draw distinctions afterwards. To-day, I only want to be thankful. And I thank you, dear old Father, I thank you. . . .

Jourdaine's Meditation

She was a good, sweet woman, you know she was. . . . She was a good, sensible woman. . . . It was all very well to look down on her from the height of your wisdom and your knowledge, you knew her advice was always wise and her heart sound. You can't reproach her with having been small-minded or with having made any petty claims. And you know how pretty she had been, and how innocent her smile still was, and that, in spite of her age, she had a charming grace that came from the youthfulness of her heart.

And yet you gave a sigh of relief when at last you were set free of her ! With what impatience, with what dreadful

haste ! . . . It wasn't your fault. I'm not blaming you. All men sigh for the moment when we shall at last consent to rid them of our presence. What are we in comparison with that foolish liberty which is the only thing you really desire? And yet, good Heavens, what do you do with it when you have it ? What do you do with it ? It makes you think you are strong, and then, when you are most pleased with yourselves, it trips you up on a piece of orange-peel.

Perhaps you don't see yet how it deceived you. You don't want to look that way ? Never mind. One can't always be reasonable. Mother wasn't always reasonable either. I'm not saying anything against her, but against women in general. They don't know they have to act the part of the wise friend. I didn't know myself ; I had to be taught ; I was a blockhead ; I had to be punished. And even now I'm not sure I've learnt properly. . . . Perhaps Mother would have lost heart. So candid she was, so unhappy in the presence of anything evil ! You were right to be careful of her. You were even indulgent to her. Then you mustn't regret anything. She was an excellent woman and you were the best of men. You two mustn't fall out any more now. You must think of her tenderly. . . . The dead are easy enough. One feels them near one. It's the living who hold out against us, who escape us. . . .

Nicholas's Meditation

And yet I too might have striven towards something . . . which would have put me with the foremost . . . which would have enabled me to walk among them as among my peers. I too was capable of having my vanity flattered, of trembling with pleasure at being distinguished from the crowd. Is it only from mean-spiritedness that I have chosen this mediocrity ? For the time has come now to look at things as they are. The mists that obscured them have been dispersed. The choice is made ; there will be no more changing. Only yesterday, Nick, my dear fellow, you might still have changed. The boy offered you a way of escape. Why did you refuse it ? Why didn't you dare take it ? And now here

you are again, re-married to the soil ! Plough, reap ! Plough, reap ! And since you have allowed yourself to be so ridiculously duped, you must remain a ridiculous dupe for ever.

Oh, I know what will happen. I know you after all these years we have lived together. I shall tell you a lot of flummery and you'll end by believing it. They accuse us of being artful because we have managed to arrange ourselves a little system of philosophy. As if it were dishonest to arrange things for oneself ! Don't the saints themselves, when they lie down, put one leg comfortably beside the other ? Don't they use a hundred little dodges to avoid laying their head upon a pebble ? In reality, they are all jealous of us. Then we possess something which perhaps isn't so common, after all ?

What subtleties shall I use to convince you ? Everything can be turned to account, even an infirmity. Even a scar may be beautiful. Think of the Parisian workman who came to lay down the tiles. How magnificent he was with his scars. A shell had slashed his face right across, from the left eyebrow to the right cheek. What character it gave him !

What else shall I say ? It isn't so important, as they think, to produce a great deal. They've fooled us too long with their statistics and their outputs. It's something else that matters though it's difficult to define. Fidelity—one doesn't exactly know to what . . . . Excellence—one doesn't exactly know of what kind . . . but all the rest's trumpery.

It'll be quite easy to give up half the woods, and make the new boundary run along by Cour Marie. We had more than we needed. We'll turn the camellias out of the conservatory and store the fodder in it. You won't be displeased, my dear Nicholas, at seeing rusticity get the better of luxury.

For when the world gets tired of being buffeted in the breakers, when the powerful have sufficiently crushed the weak, and the weak sufficiently stifled the powerful, perhaps it's our way of life that will seem the true one, and people will be astonished at having so long neglected the wisdom of our peasants.

Louis must leave again in the evening. He will have a good run ; the night is clear. The full moon's great bubble had floated up behind the trees while it was still daylight. Then in the pink and sulphur and purple of the evening sky, it had taken on substance, had lessened and intensified, its limpid disc growing brighter and harder as it rose into darkness. And now it hangs high in the heavens.

Nicholas follows his brother to the garage. Louis is in a hurry. His first committee-meeting to-morrow morning is as early as half-past eight.

" You'll come down again next Sunday ? "

" I'll try. . . . If there's a change, let me know."

" All right. Look out for the dip before you get to the main road. One can't see it at night."

The car starts. Nicholas hears it going round the house, spinning along the avenue, slowing down before it reaches the road. The sound comes muffled by the thickness of the woods, turns northward, moves round Saint Saturnin in a large quarter-circle and then grows fainter as it sets into its final direction.

Nicholas's ear can still follow it. It must come now from beyond Maisonneuve. . . . Then it dwindles almost to nothing. Anybody else would say it was inaudible, that silence had closed over it. But Nicholas is practised in the perfections of silence. Through the quiet air, he still hears a tiny throbbing. . . . In a moment . . . Now perhaps . . . Are there men who grow frightened in absolute silence—the silence that falls from the stars and permeates the whole space, filling even the shadows under the trees, settling even between the blades of grass in the fields ? But there are some too who find in it their native element, where the soul, rejoicing in its purest sustenance, drinks peace and strength.

As he stands there in the vast transparent night, Nicholas holds his breath. Saint Saturnin, favoured spot visited by the stars, partaking of the universe ! . . . And now, as he listens, he hears the living breath return to his nostrils, and the sound of his own footsteps on the gravel falls pleasantly on his ear.